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# Motorcycle Chums Stormbound.

OR

## *The Strange Adventures of a Road Chase*

By ANDREW CAREY LINCOLN

### CHAPTER I

#### A FRIENDLY BOUT WITH THE GLOVES

"It sure beats the record!"

"Whoever heard of Christmas holidays with not even a speck of shore ice on Lake Constance to encourage a fellow?"

"Huh! things have got to a pretty pass, I think, when we go and have nearly baseball weather this time of year. Why, what d'ye think, I got a brand new sweater on Christmas, which was yesterday—picked out the color myself, just to suit my fine taste; and what good's it going to do me; tell me that, Freckles?"

"Just you hold your horses, Budge; this weather ain't going to last right along; is it, Jack?"

"Well," observed the third boy, with a



laugh, "I should say not. Fact is, the way winter keeps holding off this year makes the old weather prophets say we're just sure to get a bitter time of it in February and March. Got to even up somehow, you know, boys."

"That's it," said the tall, angular boy, who was always called "Freckles" by his mates, because at most times he sported a liberal supply of the same; though in reality he bore the name of Ambrose Codling, "and mark my words Budge you'll find plenty of use for that same sweater before the flowers bloom again."

"But think of me," Jack went on to say, whimsically, "they made me a present of the finest pair of hockey skates you ever saw; and from the looks of things right now, you'd think I ought to just hang the same on the wall of my room, decorated with the colors of Staunton High. Now, if they were water skates, I might find use for them."

At that there was a laugh from Freckles, while the fat boy who answered to the name of Budge, looked rather confused, and turned redder than ever in the face.

It was no secret that Budge aspired to be a great inventor, and that once upon a time within the last year he had announced to



certain chums how he had made a wonderful pair of what he called "water shoes," with which any fellow would be able to skim along over the surface of the fine lake that lay only a few miles away from Staunton, the lively town in which these boys lived.

So, one day he invited them out to witness his triumph. Lucky for poor Budge that he had limited the number of guests to his three sworn chums, else would his humiliation have been greater.

He had fastened to his feet a pair of strange, boat-like contrivances that looked something like enormous snowshoes built up in the shape of boxes. Then off he had started with the greatest confidence in the world, while the others kept alongside in a couple of Rangeley Lake skiffs.

Alack and alas! Before Budge had taken six great strides with his wonderful "water shoes" he must have lost his balance in some way, for he struggled desperately, waved his arms frantically, and then vanished from view.

The other boys had to cut the clumsy contrivance loose in a big hurry, and drag the unfortunate inventor aboard a boat, more dead than alive; for Freckles claimed that Budge



had swallowed enough water to lower the lake several inches.

From that day on Budge never attempted to walk on the water again; and for fear lest the more agile Freckles might want to try the shoes, and excel him at his own game, he had taken an ax, and deliberately smashed the things into kindling-wood.

That was doubtless what Jack Kinkaid so slyly referred to when he spoke about what fun he might have, could he change his now useless Christmas present into "water skates."

At the time the three lads were thus exchanging views on the probability of the week's holidays passing without their customary frolics on the ice, or with their bobsleds down the steep hillsides near Staunton, they were gathered in what the fat boy, Budge, whose real name was Nelson Clifford, chose to call his "laboratory."

His father was the mayor of Staunton, being a wealthy, retired business man; and having fond recollections of his own boyhood, he sympathized so much with the aspirations of his son that there was nothing within the bounds of reason which the latter expressed a desire to own, but that his wish was granted.



The fact of the matter was that Budge showed such an abnormal inclination to put on flesh that his parents were worried. They believed that in order to counteract this unpleasant tendency the boy should indulge in all manner of vigorous outdoor sports. Indeed, Dr. Codling, father of Freckles, had secretly advised such a course of treatment; and as it just suited the ideas of Budge, he had a motorcycle and all manner of up-to-date appliances in his gymnasium, from Indian clubs to lifting machines and parallel bars.

The "laboratory" was a little den off from the barn which had been transformed into a gymnasium at the time the change had been made from a carriage and pair to a touring car, and a spacious garage built. Indeed, this very room had doubtless once been used to hang the various sets of harness in. And here, too, Budge must have wasted the midnight oil, or electricity, in fashioning those amazing "water shoes" that would have brought him to his death, only for his wisdom in having his chums along at the time he first gave them a real test on the lake.

There was a fourth member of the little circle, and his name was Alec Travers. To tell the truth he was the leader of the quar-



tette; and the rest were only too pleased to look up to him in this capacity, as a general thing. Once in a while Freckles, or it might be Budge, would try to usurp the reins; and at such time good-natured Alec let them have all the rope they wanted, even encouraging them in their ambition, possibly knowing that the usual result would come about all the sooner.

Alec had no parents, but lived with a guardian, a Mr. Worthington, who was well-to-do; and as the boy would come into quite a good-sized fortune when he reached the age of twenty-five, according to his father's will, he never lacked for means.

But Alec was rather different from most lads of his age, and Mr. Worthington had no fear of his liberality being abused in the slightest degree.

"Wonder if Alec's thought up anything for us to do the next four days," remarked Freckles, as he picked up some object that he discovered lying on the desk of the ambitious inventor; whereupon it was deftly snatched out of his hands by Budge, and rammed in a capacious drawer. "Hello! what's that mean, Budge?" the tall boy added; "what under the sun are you trying



to get up next? Looked like a frog to me."

"Frog!" ejaculated the inventor, looking daggers at his chum, "seems like your education must a been neglected, that you can't tell a real bird when you see one."

"Oh! was that what it was?" exclaimed Freckles, "well, what's the difference any way, only a few feathers. Why do I say that, you're just going to ask? Why, didn't you ever hear the story about the Irishman who went out hunting shortly after he landed in America?"

"No, go on and tell it, Freckles," urged Jack, who was looking at some prints the owner of the "laboratory" had tacked on the walls, and which included airships, motorcycle designs, and all manner of things along those lines.

"Well, you must know they don't have frogs over in Ireland, at least that's what I've been told by Mickey O'Brannagan down at the livery stable. And Pat, seeing a lovely red-bird, took deliberate aim, shut both eyes, and banged away. As he pulled both triggers at the same time, of course he landed on his back. When he got to his feet, the bird was out of sight; but Pat felt sure he must have bagged his game, so going up to the tree



he began to hunt around under it, till he suddenly spied a frog. He looked at it in astonishment, picked it up, and held it out; and this is what he said: 'Arrah! but ye wore a foine birrd afore I knocked all the fithers aff yer back!' "

Of course the other boys had a laugh at the story; but Freckles returned again to the attack. His curiosity had really been aroused by that rough pattern of a bird which he had found on the desk of the ambitious but thus far very unsuccessful Budge.

"See here, you," he remarked, shaking his long forefinger in the face of his stout chum; "what're you up to now? I hope you haven't got a notion in your head that you can invent an aeroplane that will beat a creation hollow. Just remember the fate of Darius Green and his flying machine, will you, and take warning? Why, bless your innocent soul, Budge, if ever you tried to fly, and took a header, you'd splash all over the country when you struck. Take my advice, and don't do it. Bad enough for you to ride a motorcycle, and go scouring all over this broad land with Alec, Jack and myself; but draw the line at sticking to the earth. If any thing happens to you while on



It was only a question of time when the surplus of flesh borne by the challenger must weary him; and then would come the opportunity Freckles was waiting for.

Finally the efforts of Budge to get in a swift, well-aimed blow began to tell on him, and instead of being the aggressor, he had to defend himself. Freckles seemed to wake up, and it was he who did the dancing around now, making frequent jabs at some exposed part of the fat boy's body, and often landing with more or less of a thump, that would bring out a grunt from the one who received it.

Faster and warmer grew the battle, and evidently Budge must take a good many more private lessons from his instructor before he could best the lanky chum at this lively game. Both were perspiring freely, but Budge was as obstinate as a mule—he had been nicknamed by his boy friends simply because as a rule he would never budge—and refused to acknowledge defeat, seeming to hope for a lucky break that would favor him.

Suddenly Freckles made a tremendous effort, and shot his mitt out with such power that poor Budge was knocked backward, struck a window, and disappeared from the view of his chums amid a jingling of broken glass.



## CHAPTER II

## THE BEARER OF NEWS

"Oh! thunder! I didn't mean to do that!" gasped the astonished Freckles, when he heard the crash, and saw his antagonist vanish through the window, which he really carried with him, sash and all.

Jack Kinkaid was quick to act.

While the tall boy stood there, almost petrified with surprise and consternation, he sprang to the opening, and thrust his head out. Immediately he was seen to stretch his hand toward some one who must have been within reach.

It was Budge, of course. He had landed on a big piano case that by the greatest of good luck happened to lie just under that particular barn window; just as if on purpose to receive his sprawling figure.

Freckles saw that his face was streaked in little patches with blood; and that aroused him as nothing else could do. Remorse was tearing at his heart; he already felt de-



cidedly uncomfortable because he had allowed himself to put so much "steam" into that last unfortunate blow.

"Oh! I'm awful sorry, Budge, I did it; sure I never meant to hit you so hard!" he exclaimed, hastening to the side of the fat boy, as Jack assisted the other to carefully crawl back through the window.

Even in defeat Budge refused to acknowledge unconditional surrender.

"Huh!" he grunted, being very short of wind, "you needn't flatter yourself that you did it all. Chances are, if I hadn't caught my heel in a crack just when you lunged for me, my little game would a-worked, and I'd a-ducked the neatest ever. Say, Jack, am I a sight; will I look like the map of Ireland, with all them scratches running criss-cross over my face? And just to think, there's goin' to be one of them nice barn dances Friday night, up-country, and I've asked Susie Thomas to go with me! Oh! my stars, am I marked for life? Who's got some court plaster handy? Freckles, don't you always carry a supply along? Take a good look, Jack, and tell me the worst. I'm gettin' a good grip on myself, and I kin stand it now. Go on."



When Jack had investigated, and rubbed the streaks of blood away with his handkerchief, he announced the glad news that he did not believe any serious damage had been done by the broken glass.

"Only a few scratches, Budge, believe me," he declared, "and they'll never show two weeks from now. But I warn you that you won't look as pretty right away as you have been doing. It'll take half a foot of plaster to cover all these lines. And let me tell you it was as lucky an escape as anybody'd want to have. Why, you might have cut yourself terribly with all that broken glass. Every pane went to smash. My! but you shot out of that window like a cannon ball!"

"Means more work for me a-puttin' that sash to rights again; but I'm that thankful it's no worse, I'll do it gladly. But don't think I'm going to throw up the sponge, and cry quits with you, Freckles. Just you wait, that's all."

"Till you get a few more lessons from Sim, is that it?" retorted the other, with a grin; "oh! all right, Budge, only next time we have to go I'm meaning to make sure there's no window for you to back through, when I give you a gentle little tap. I was badly scared,



and that's right, when I heard the smash, and saw your heels going through there."

"Well," observed Budge, in a resigned mood, "I reckon I oughtn't to put up any kick if only I look decent enough to go to that barn dance on Friday; I'd hate sure to disappoint Susie."

"So far as that goes, don't you worry; I'll see that she gets there, if so be you can't go," remarked Freckles, calmly; at which the other stared at him, frowned, and shook his head while waiting for Jack to start using the court plaster that had been produced.

"You seem to be mighty accommodating, Freckles Codling," he remarked, suspiciously. "Makes me remember that you used to be sweet on Susie yourself, till she took to going places with me. P'raps this was a plot to knock me out of attending that dance with her. I begin to smell a rat."

"Then hurry up and get your broom and basket, because, you see, they weren't needed to sweep me up after all," chuckled the tall boy, throwing the padded boxing gloves aside after he had unlaced them.

"Listen!" exclaimed Jack, pausing a minute later, in the act of covering the last double



scratch, which Budge himself humorously referred to as the "canals on Mars."

"Somebody coming, that's right!" added Freckles, who had a keen pair of ears.

"And of course it must be Alec; because none of that old Gid Staples' crowd ever bother us nowadays," added Budge.

"A good reason why," Jack went on to say. "We managed to teach them a good lesson the last time, and they're in the same class with the burnt child that dreads the fire. They know how it hurts to run up against the mower, or fall into the threshing machine. Yes, it's our Alec, all right, for there goes the signal."

"Answer it, somebody, please," urged Budge, "it ought to be my place, as the fellow owning the ranch; but with all this sticking plaster on my cheeks and nose and forehead. I feel like my face was crinkled up, and I couldn't crack a smile to save me. That's right, Freckles, you're a good whistler. And here he comes."

The outer door opened to give admittance to a well-built boy, who possessed a resolute face, and brown eyes, as well as curly hair of the same color.



Of course he stared as he saw what Jack was doing.

"Well, tell me what's been going on here among you fellows?" he asked as soon as he could catch his breath.

Freckles simply pointed toward the gaping sash; and naturally the sight of this only increased the wonderment of the newcomer.

"Tell me," he exclaimed, "did somebody throw a stone through that window, and hit you, Budge? But no, that couldn't have been, because I don't see even a little bit of broken glass on the floor. That sash must have gone outward; say, did you fall with it, Budge? What were you doing? Oh! I see now; you've got your gloves on, haven't you? Who did it, Freckles?"

"Yes, we were having a friendly little bout; you see, and he made a crack at me which I meant to duck; but I caught my heel and he landed. As I'd lost my balance, why, you see, I just went kerflop through backwards. Tell me, am I going to be marked for life, Alec? Jack says not, but then mebbe he's just telling me that so I won't know the worst all at once. D'ye think I might go to that barn dance Friday night. Will I look like a butcher? Can I take the court plaster



off by then, would you think, Alec? Oh! tell me something to encourage me, won't you?"

So Alec had to gravely examine his hurts, and when this had been done he assured the anxious fat boy that he had had the luckiest tumble in all his career, since the chances were as forty-nine out of fifty that he might have met with a terrible injury, with all that splintered glass around him.

Being very clumsy Budge was frequently getting into trouble with his numerous stumbles. His friends could look back to a multitude of scrapes he had got into just because it was so easy for him to trip, and go lunging headlong. But his good nature covered a multitude of short-comings; it was like the mantle of charity that hides a host of petty sins.

"I'm glad to hear you say all that, Alec," Budge went on, as Jack finished the job of plastering his face, until he looked a curious sight, and might have passed for a tattooed South Sea Islander, so Freckles hastened to assure him; telling the other that he had the chance of his life to make a profitable engagement.

"You wouldn't go and contract with Bar-



num for his fat boy when we wanted you to," he went on to say, with pretended indignation," and now you'd command a much higher salary as the Wild Boy from Borneo, just caught in the bush, and with his face all tattooed after the style of his tribe. You'll be sorry you let this chance go by, Budge. Think of the good times you'd have, seein' the world free, and gettin' all the good eatin', same's the other freaks. Think it over. It's the chance of a life-time, old feller."

Budge, however, was used to the chaffing of this joking chum; so that he only nodded his head, made a little grimace of pain, and then grinned horribly; that word is the only one capable of describing his appearance with all those strips of the court plaster adorning his red face, and the whole distorted into what he doubtless intended to be a smile.

"Forget it, won't you, fellers?" he remarked. "It's a past number now. I'm the only one to suffer. Yes, if you want, Freckles, you can even up by coming around tomorrow morning, and help me put new glass in that sash. Be sure'n come early, mind you, because," with a quick glance



toward Alec, "something might happen that we'd want to skip out of town in a hurry."

"That's right," added Freckles, "because I c'n see by the look on Alec's face, that he's holding something back right now. What's the use of keeping us on the anxious seat, so? Suppose you own up, Alec. When do we start?"

"Just as soon after breakfast as we can get away. Fact is, I'm going to ask you three to drop around, and have an early bite with me, so's to gain an hour or so of time," Alec went on to say.

That caused the others to exchange puzzled glances.

"What's all the hurry about, Alec?" grumbled Budge, who never liked to be unduly pushed, but preferred to just take his own time about things, like most stout people do, "Rome wasn't built in a day. And you know breakfast's nearly always my best meal of the whole day. If I don't get my usual supply aboard then, I'm apt to be peeved for a long time afterwards, and make everybody sorry."

"Yes, why stir up the roaring lion that way, Alec?" Freckles remarked. "You told us once that we ought to make that cabin camp of Mr. Sands' in less'n six hours, under



favorable conditions; and sure, the roads are pretty fair right now, considering that it's close to the end of December, when they're nearly always buried under two feet of snow."

Alec pretended to look surprised, for he elevated his eyebrows.

"Who said anything about Mr. Sands' camp?" he observed.

"What! Ain't we going up there, then?" demanded Budge, weakly.

"Not that I know of," came the quick reply.

"Then where are we going, Alec?" asked Freckles. "For goodness' sake alive, if you ain't the most tantalizing feller I ever saw. Headed for Florida this time; or is it a nice little spin down through Mexico, to see what the revolutionists are doing these days? But whatever it is, tell us right away. Budge here will surely have a fit and burst his hoops if you don't spit it out quick."

"Well, the fact is, boys, after we start out in the early morning, I don't know any more than you do where we'll bring up. We're going somewhere, and in a big hurry, too," and Alec calmly seated himself, while the others gathered around him in a semi-circle,



their faces eloquent of curiosity in great streaks.

"Oh! come off, Alec, and stop tantalizing a feller," said Budge.

"Yes," added Jack, "you've got us all keyed up to high pitch now, Alec; so take pity on us, and spin your little yarn, like a good fellow."

"Just what I'm going to do, boys," the newcomer went on to say. "We've been through a whole lot of odd happenings together since first we got our motorcycles; but by the time you hear what we're bound to try next, you'll agree with me that it's the queerest stunt of the whole bunch. And now, listen!"



## CHAPTER III

## MOTORCYCLE AGAINST TOURING CAR

"Go on, Alec, and don't you dare hold back another second," exclaimed Budge, making a threatening fist of his chubby hand, and waving it before the eyes of the tantalizing one.

"What's your hurry, Budge?" asked Alec, seeing his chance to get back at the stout chum, "don't you remember, Rome wasn't built in a day? Just hold in your horses; take things easy, like I do, and you'll grow fat. But, joking aside, boys, the queerest thing possible has just happened over at our house."

"Yes?" the three others said in unison, as Alec paused to catch his breath.

"You remember a friend of my guardian stopped over with us last night. He was heading north in his car at the time, and left this morning. It never occurred to Mr. Worthington that he had forgotten to ask where he expected to stop tonight, until he



suddenly ran across a very important paper that Judge Rollins must have dropped without knowing it. It is of the greatest importance that he get it again as soon as possible. Mr. Worthington doesn't know where he could get in touch with him inside of a week, and it will be too late then, for the option will have expired, and the judge stands to lose a big slice of his fortune. Are you following me, boys?"

"You bet we are; go right along," cried Freckles, whose eyes were really sparkling with excitement, as though he already scented the glorious proposal which the other was soon to put forward.

"When I saw how troubled Mr. Worthington was," continued Alec, "suddenly, just like that, I had an idea. The roads are good, the weather seems to promise to be fine yet awhile; now, what was to hinder me going on my motorcycle after Judge Rollins and tracking him along from village to village, finally overtake him, restore the paper, and then come back, after having a bully spin over a couple of hundred miles, it might be?"

"Wow! one of your brightest flashes, and that's saying a good lot, Alec, because you're



always having 'em," Freckles declared with the air of sincerity that told how he meant every word of it.

"And of course, when you say that you could do this, it's just the same as meaning three other fellows I could name go along with you?" suggested Jack, confidently.

"Well," remarked Budge, "I'd like to see him proposing to leave us in the lurch, when we've got a standin' agreement to the effect that an injury to one is an injury to all; and that we share and share alike whether it be good or evil. Course it means we're in the swim with Alec. He never could think anything else," was the way Budge gave vent to his opinion.

Alec seemed to wince a little, though he did not try to persuade Budge to change his mind—not just then, at any rate.

"Well, now that you get the idea how does it seem to strike you?" he asked.

"I think it would be a cracker jack of a run!" exclaimed Freckles.

"And seems to me it would give us a good chance to air our knowledge of following a trail," said Jack, who seemed greatly pleased with the idea. "It ought to be great fun figuring out just which way they would be



most apt to turn whenever we come to a cross-roads, or where the pike forks. And think of the thousand-and-one questions we can fire at people, asking them if they've seen such and such a car pass by, how long since, bound which way, and so on. I give you my word for it, Alec, I like the idea first-rate."

"I've been reading up some more on that subject," admitted Budge, cautiously, as he glanced first at Alec, and then at each of the others, as though wondering how they would take the fact, "and let me tell you, it's mighty interestin', now. There's ways to follow a trail even when it goes in and out of the water. And p'raps, if I had a chance I might show you something I studied by heart."

Alec rubbed his chin, and then looked uneasily at Budge, giving the others a sly wink meanwhile, which put them wise to the fact that there was something up.

"Do you think it would be wise for you to undertake such a strenuous chase, Budge, heating up your blood, so soon after you've been seriously injured?" Alec asked, as a feeler.

"But you're mistaken, Alec; I ain't hurt much at all. This here lot of plasters might



make you think so, but it's pretty much all a bluff. A few little scratches, that's all. Who cares for them? Course I'm in good trim for a warm spin; never felt better in all my life. And you know, all of you do, that I've improved in my riding a hundred per cent since that time we went down to the Land of the Sky in North Carolina. I don't take near so many headers as I used to; and I always pick out a nice soft place to land in, don't I, Freckles?"

Thus directly appealed to, and in such a plaintive tone, the tall boy could not find it in his heart to deny the fact.

"I just reckon, suh, that is what you do," he went on, pretending to imitate one of the natives whom the motorcycle boys may have met in their visit to the Southland just mentioned. "Leastwise, I remember that the very last time you got pitched by your bucking motorcycle, you did drop into the muck bed of a marsh; and we had to pull you out by means of long poles. Whee! I c'n hear that squash when you lit, every time I think of it. And how the mud did fly!"

"There, that settles it, Alec. Count me in when you make up the roster of them that are going on this new trip," declared Budge,



with the look on his face that stood for determination and never-give-upness."

"But there's one thing you forget, Budge," insinuated Freckles, who guessed how Alec would rather the fat rider did not try to keep along with the rest of the party on this particular little dash, that promised to be a warm one.

"Oh! I know I'm always forgetting all sorts of things; but what is it now? Is my head sewed on straight? Have I got both my arms? Did I leave one of my feet behind me this time, Freckles?" asked the fat boy, in what was doubtless intended to be a sarcastic vein.

"It's Susie," ventured the other.

"And you did promise to take her to that barn dance Friday night, for a fact; any way, you told us you had," Jack went on to say, insinuatingly.

But Budge was not to be moved. When he made up his mind to do anything, it was next to impossible to change him.

"That's all right," he replied coolly, "and I hope yet that the expedition gets back in time for me to redeem my promise; but if we should be unexpectedly delayed, why, you see, I've got a good excuse in my present



condition. I can stick a little more plaster on my knob, and when she sees how I look she'll forgive me. When duty beckons a Clifford they never, never, back down. So just count on me helping to follow that trail. And since that point's settled, and you can't fease me from the stand I've taken, suppose you go on, Alec, and tell us what you know about the signs; because I guess you've been and found out some things before now, that'll be mighty handy, when we're trying to follow this Judge Rollins up."

"Thank you, Budge, for thinking so well of me," replied the other.

"And I guess, then, we'll all just have to make the start," remarked Freckles, who knew that would only make the fat boy more obstinate if they kept on trying to throw obstacles in his way.

"What do you know about the judge and his car, Alec?" asked Jack.

"Oh! I happened to take a look over the machine when he had it ready to leave this morning," replied the one addressed.

"And noticed a whole lot of little things, I'll be bound," ventured Freckles.

"Well, a few," returned Alec, smiling. "In the first place, he's got a dandy big Alco



car, one of the finest things I ever sat eyes on; and I reckon Judge Rollins never paid a cent less than six thousand for the same, when it was new. It's in splendid condition even now, and he said he had it ever since the first Vanderbilt Cup race. But I noticed that a couple of the tires had been patched; and that he was carrying new ones to use in case either of these gave out while on the road. I guess they're like motorcycle tires, and go off with a roar when there's a bad puncture."

"I'm on," said Freckles, breaking in hastily, "you even went so far as to examine those tires, and notice what sort of a mark they'd be apt to make if ever they went through hard mud; how's that, Alec, for a guess?"

"Right to the bulls-eye, for a fact, Freckles, because that's just what I did do; and I found a couple of queer marks that you could tell like a flash, if ever you had half a chance."

"Bully for you, Alec!" exclaimed the delighted Budge. "I can see what a grand good time we're going to have pretty soon when we get started on this run. Don't I just wish it was tomorrow morning, right now. Yum! yum! Guess I wouldn't lose



this chance of being along for a big lot of cookies."

After that nobody had the heart to try and convince the ambitious Budge that it was unwise for him to think of setting out with a group of hard riders, who were either bound to leave him far in the lurch, or else have their own speed considerably cut down by the fact that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. And, indeed, it would not have done the least good, anyway.

"But it's like looking for a needle in a haystack," observed Alec, "because, just now we haven't the slightest idea which way Judge Rollins was heading, only that he mentioned having a little errand in Braidentown."

"That's what they'd call a leading clue, ain't it, Alec?" asked Budge.

"Well, it's a clue, and will take us that far without having to bother much with looking for the marked tire of the Alco car. Then, after we strike out from that town we'll have to mark every mile as we run. If we suddenly miss the track we'll go back again, and pick it up."

"Still, I'd just like to wager that we'll



come up on the judge before we quit," declared Freckles.

"Will we?" echoed Budge, "well, I should say yes to that question. Haven't we always accomplished what we set out to do? Haven't we climbed over all obstacles? Say tell me that, will you? Just as Freckles here says, though we seldom agree, as you may have noticed before now, we've been a mighty lucky bunch up to the present and generally managed to get there with both feet, roughshod."

"What shall we take along, Alec?" asked Jack.

"Yes, will we have to put in the night outdoors, with only a camp fire to keep us from freezing?" demanded Freckles.

"Don't forget that it hasn't been down to the freezing point six times since the frost nipped the leaves, and started the chestnuts to dropping," interrupted Budge, who often chose to be very exact in what he said, and was never known to tell a fish story.

"Well, I'm going to leave that pretty much to each one of the rest," Alec went on to say, "only it would not be wise to load ourselves down with a whole lot of things we wouldn't be apt to need."



"Now, you're giving me a sly dig when you say that, Alec; and there are two sillies just bubbling over with laughter. But I don't care a snap. I own up that I am inclined to lug along a lot more than is absolutely needed to keep a feller alive; but then the wheel carries the load, not me; and under those circumstances, don't you know that if a feller chooses to make a pack mule of himself, for the benefit of the whole bunch, why, he ought to be let alone, I think."

No one had a word to say. They knew only too well the generous, big-hearted nature of Budge; yes, he would perspire and grunt and stagger under a load; and when the time came for eating, it would be found that he had been doing all this hard work as a labor of love, and had carried a lot of stuff which he well knew happened to be particularly relished by his friends. He was utterly unselfish; and it could never be said of him that he thought of himself first.

"Well," said Freckles, "I sure hope you'll have the good sense to leave that old banjo of yours behind. You insisted on taking it along a number of times, and it really makes me feel sick to hear you plunking away with



your eyes shut, and trying to sing sentimental songs by the light of the camp fire."

"That's a subject you and me can never agree on, Freckles," replied Budge with unusual dignity, for him, "when a feller can't appreciate good music, why, nobody could pound it into him with a club. You're the only one that ever made a big kick against my playing; and I've come to the conclusion that it's just green jealousy with you. Alec hasn't limited us to what we can take, and I'd thank you to leave me alone. For one thing, I'm sure going to carry that new sweater with me, and get it on the first thing when it feels cold. Do we want some grub along with us, Alec?"

"Yes," replied the other, "we'd better, to make sure, because we don't know where the trail may lead us. Before we get back to old Staunton again, we may pass through some of the queerest adventures that ever came our way."

"The more the merrier," sang out the reckless Freckles, who was always hoping for something to crop up, to break the dull monotony, being a nervous fellow.

And accordingly, they started to discuss that important matter, for it is hard to find a



boy who is not intensely interested in the question of what ought to be brought along for meals.

Before the four boys separated that night they had laid out a little programme, by which each one was to be bound. Daylight would come in about half-past six, and four alarm clocks were to be set for six, so that they might gather at Alec's house in time to partake of the breakfast he would fix it up with the good-natured colored cook to have waiting for them. After that, when the light grew strong enough for them to see the road plainly, the bugle would sound the advance, and immediately following, the merry popping of motors was going to announce that the Motorcycle Chums were once more in the saddle, starting out upon the road, and bent upon a mission that meant considerable to those who were most concerned.

And four boys doubtless woke up on numerous occasions during that night, to consult the clocks, and then climb back, disappointed, into a warm bed.



## CHAPTER IV

“STOP! YOU ARE IN THE GRASP OF THE LAW!”

Thanks to the faithful warning given out by the alarms of those same little nickel clocks, there was no hitch in the arrangements that morning.

Even the usually late Budge turned up five minutes ahead of Jack and Freckles, greatly to the amusement of Alec. However, he could read between the lines, and understood that the fat boy was really concerned lest he be left behind, if he gave his chums any reasonable excuse for deserting him at the start.

The breakfast was all that could be asked for, and even Budge admitted that he could think of no complaint. And afterwards the four motorcycles, polished up to look almost like new, and with every part in the best possible working order, were ranged out in the road, ready for the start.

Mr. Worthington had arisen in time to wave them a goodbye, and wish them the



very best of success in their mission. Then Alec led off, for a rule he was the acknowledged pacemaker of the quartette, and had studied the subject so thoroughly that he made a splendid success of the job.

They knew the failings of Budge so well that they seldom thought of leaving him at the tail end of the procession. Sometimes he was sandwiched in between Alec and Jack; or else between the latter and Freckles, who liked to bring up the rear under the impression that next to being leader this thing of playing rear guard was the proper caper for an ambitious fellow.

It had been before sun-up that the little noisy procession sped out of Staunton, and was on the way.

Alec had figured the whole thing out for them on the preceding evening, and they knew just about where they might make their best gains. Besides going much faster, as a rule, than a gentleman of Mr. Rollins' nature would think of driving his big touring Alco machine, there would be possibly two hours picked up in the early morning. Then the chances were that the traveler would get weary toward the middle of the afternoon, and quit at the first good chance of a decent inn. This



happening on both days, would give them a fine opportunity to double up; so that there was really a fair chance of their overtaking the other before they gave up the run on this day.

Of course this sort of figuring did not allow for serious accidents calculated to delay them any great length of time.

Should anything of this kind happen, they would have to count on another day's run, at least.

Until they reached Braidentown, then, there was really no need of looking up the mark of the patched tire. After that, Alec knew they would have to depend to some extent on this, in order to successfully follow the touring car; though from time to time they might hope to pick up information from those who had seen the Alco pass.

Alec knew, however, that such information is often very unreliable. Some of these country people were apt to take a strange delight in putting them on a wrong tack, just to see them come back later, and look ugly.

Then again others might want to help so much, that they would even invent things in order to seem important; or else in hopes of a little tip of silver, always acceptable. And



so Alec was determined to use his own judgment, and weigh all such information well in the balance before accepting the same. And there was a method of getting the informant to describe the touring car, without putting the words in his mouth.

All went well for the start. The four machines whirled merrily along the good road that led far away over the hills to Braidentown. The boys knew the ground that far, as all of them had been over it many a time. Once they left the town, however, it would be new territory to them, and they must depend on the little road map which Alec had secured, or else their own common sense, to guide them further on their way.

The motorcycles took the hills in fine shape, since they were in the pink of condition, with plenty of fuel, and lubricating oil aboard.

The morning air was cool, but hardly cold; indeed one would believe that it must be early in October, only for the fact that the frost-touched leaves were all off the trees, save for the oaks, and a few others, where they cling for the better part of the winter, brown and stubborn, and unwilling to give up until the new ones start to pushing them off.

Even Budge was feeling in great spirits.



As a rule he did not enjoy these long runs quite as much as his three chums, and for numerous reasons. In the first place, he was hardly built for such energetic work, and felt the strain more than such a thin chap as Freckles, for instance. Then again, he was clumsy, and sitting for so many hours in such a cramped position was apt to tire him dreadfully; so there had been times when the others were forced to lift poor Budge from his seat after a particularly exhausting day's work.

Then, Budge was apt to meet with all sorts of trouble, most of them doubtless due to the fact of his own clumsiness. Lots of persons declared that the stout boy should never have taken to a swift motorcycle at all, and prophesied that sooner or later he would meet with a serious accident. But thus far he had escaped rather luckily; and that stubborn nature of his would not let him give up the fine sport just because a few silly people said it was dangerous. In fact, the way to get Budge to do anything at all, was to try and stop him; once he got a notion in his head that you objected to his trying a thing, and he would devote all his energies



to the task of accomplishing the same, no matter at what cost.

And properly directed this determination might yet prove to be the making of the boy some day.

The boys knew that there was really only one good road out of Braidentown, and leading north. Accordingly, they did not even take the bother of asking anybody whether they had seen the big touring car pass.

They used their eyes while going through the little town, and presently were on the road beyond. Once free from observation Alec sounded his horn, and gave the well known signal that indicated an intended stop.

Presently he had his three chums about him, all of them eager to know what was in the wind.

"It's about time we looked up the trail of the touring car, and made a note of the mark I told you about," Alec was saying.

He had already placed his machine in its stand so that he could leave it, but at one side of the road, so that if anything came along there was plenty of room to pass. Long experience when abroad had taught these motorcycle boys to be on the safe side



whenever possible, and take as few chances as they could. Trouble hunted them up often enough, without their going out of the way to find it.

Before Alec had been looking a full minute he turned, and beckoned to the rest.

"Found it, have you?" asked Freckles, coming on the run.

"Let's see what she looks like," demanded Budge, bristling with importance.

So Alec pointed down to the ground. The road was in pretty good shape, considering the time of year, and would take impressions well in spots. Here, where the touring car may have veered slightly to one side, no other vehicle had happened to cover the tracks of the tires, and the marks were plainly seen.

Of course the patched tire was one of the rear ones, otherwise any singular formation could not have been noticeable; but there it was, plain as anything could be. The four boys studied the mark for a full minute.

"Think you'll be able to pick it up again anywhere else?" asked Alec.

"Sure thing," replied the confident Freckles."

"Why, that's as easy as falling off a log," asserted Budge.



Jack only nodded and smiled, though the chances were he had taken more careful notice of the patch than either of his overconfident chums; but then Jack was a quiet fellow, as a rule; one of the kind of whom they say that "still waters run deep."

"Then there's no use of our spending any more time here," remarked the leader of the quartette, turning back to where the motorcycles were standing.

"There comes the sun up," said Budge, pointing to the east. "How far do you expect we are on our way, Alec?"

"Oh! Braidentown is about sixteen miles from Staunton, I believe," was the reply.

From now they might expect to keep constantly on the watch, so as not to be caught napping. Whenever they came to a fork of the road it would be necessary to make a halt, in order to find out which way the touring car went.

Strange to say, it was Budge who grumbled most about these little delays. He had his mad speed cap on this morning, surely; and the others hardly knew what to make of their chum, usually quite satisfied to be dragged along, by threats of being left in the lurch.



An hour later, and they were booming along quite merrily. The sun was well up, and somehow felt quite agreeable. There was actually a little dust on the road, a most unusual thing in December, when one would expect a foot of snow, at least.

The other boys had eyed Budge's mount suspiciously when he showed up early that morning; but then they always expected to find him well weighted down with all manner of things, until people must think he represented a new type of itinerant peddler. Freckles, in particular, eyed the various mysterious packages, and from time to time shook his head, and muttered something to himself about the ways of some people that were past finding out. Perhaps he even suspected that Budge had hidden that objectionable banjo somewhere about in those bundles, and was going to spring it on them at some unexpected moment.

Now, there was not anything so very dreadful about the musical aspirations of the fat boy; and Freckles only kept up this badinage because he saw that Budge was touchy in connection with the subject. Alec and Jack had nothing to say, and often really enjoyed seeing Budge warbling away, with



his eyes dreamily closed, and resting in the full belief that he was singing like a Caruso, as he picked at the strings of his pet banjo.

Still another hour had passed, and they were doing finely. At the last stop the mark of the patched rear tire had been plainly seen, so that the boys knew they were still on the right track. Why, even Budge had declared that this was as easy a job as they had ever attempted to carry out.

They were spinning along at a pretty good speed, though Alec knew they must cut this down presently, as he had discovered indications that there was some sort of a town ahead, which they would either pass through or skirt.

These good intentions, it seemed, came just a little too late. Alec was even in the act of reaching for his horn, to give the "slow-up" signal, when he was astonished and disgusted to see a man suddenly spring out in the middle of the road some distance ahead, wildly brandishing his arms, and then putting what seemed to be a megaphone to his mouth, shouting at the top of his voice the words:

"Stop! You are in the grasp of the Law!"



## CHAPTER V

## UP AGAINST IT, GOOD AND HARD

It was a speed trap!

Alec knew this just as soon as he saw that man waving his arm so wildly; while the words shouted through the megaphone added to his conviction.

Well, they were certainly fairly caught, because the country constable had in some manner managed to drop a long beam across the road, so that they could not pass by. He certainly must have become possessed of a mania to increase the revenues of his town, at the expense of passing tourists who, never dreaming that they were within the limits of the corporation, since even the church spire seemed some ways off, were pretty sure to be caught napping.

And no doubt this wideawake officer of the law was fortified with all the documents necessary to prove that they must appear before a justice, and settle according to the



statutes of the community, for speeding within the town limits.

Perhaps his activity would be explained if the fact were known that half the fine went to the officer making the arrest.

Alec was quick to act.

He knew there was no passing that alert sentinel, and especially since he had succeeded in dropping that stout pole across the road, effectually barring it.

Accordingly Alec gave the usual blast on his bugle to warn his comrades coming spinning along in the rear that they must slow up, and be ready to stop short. And immediately afterwards he shut off power, preparing at the same time to put on the brake if there should be any danger of his crashing into that obstruction.

Meanwhile the country constable was jumping about like a mannikin, waving a big pistol in one hand, and the megaphone in the other.

Alec looked at him, and felt like rubbing his eyes, because the fellow was just as he had seen his class represented in moving pictures—a lanky chap, with his trousers thrust into his boot-tops, wearing a long coat because he doubtless imagined that would add dignity to his appearance, and with a



peaked cap that gave him a rather sinister look.

“Pull up, every blisterin’ one of ye!” he kept on shouting, while he danced about, waving that old weapon in a menacing manner. “I got wind of yuh coming along like mad ten miles below hyah. Think yuh own the hull kentry, I guess. Well, we’re on to the likes of yuh up hyah; and we feels as haow yuh ought to help us pay for the roads yuh ride over. Twenty-five apiece, it’ll be when yuh gits before the Squire. Look out, yuh fatty haow yuh run intew me. Consider yerselves all under arrest. I represent the dignity of the Law.”

He pointed with considerable pride to his bright nickel badge which was fastened on the left breast of the frock coat that had seen its best days many years ago.

This was a time for quick thinking on the part of Alec, if he hoped to pull out of the distressing situation without considerable loss of time.

“What’s all this mean?” exclaimed the blustering Freckles. “You’ve got a heap of nerve, Mister, to hold up a party of quiet motor boys out for a little spin. What have we been doing, I’d like to know, to



bother you and your old town, that we ain't never seen even?"

The officious constable thereupon pulled out a great big silver watch that looked as though it might be used to time the races at the county fair, which was possibly its true function; but the owner had discovered a more profitable use to put it to, and was doubtless getting rich fast, at the expense of those tourists who from time to time came up this way.

"Speed limit is ten miles an hour inside the corporation limits of Squashville. You was goin' at jest thirty-seven when yuh hit the line, an' twenty-six when I gives yuh the call down. No use makin' a kick, 'cause I got it all down fine, and never lost a case befoah the Squire yet. Four o' ye, at twenty-five apiece makes an even hundred. Purty good mornin' work, I guess, for me."

He grinned as though pleased. No doubt he was already fingering his share of the spoils. And yet they talk about those highwaymen who used to hold up travelers on Hounslow Heath over near London years upon years ago; they took chances, whereas the modern "stand and deliver man" has the law back of him.



Alec knew that unless they could bribe this constable to let them go on, they were due to meet with a tedious stop that would play havoc with all their plans. He would march them into town, and perhaps insist upon their being locked up, to await the pleasure of the Squire, who might not convene his court and be ready to sit upon their case for some hours.

It was exasperating to say the least. The money part of it was bad enough; but that was not the worst; for doubtless Mr. Sands upon recovering those valuable papers would be only too glad to make the fine good; and even if he did not, the treasury of the Motorcycle Club was able to stand a few drains like that without feeling it.

So Alec, like a wise general, while preparing for open hostilities, started in to see whether he could not soften the hard heart of the speed trap fiend, who undoubtedly had a mania for this sort of work, and hated motorists of all stripes.

Putting on his best smile, therefore, Alec approached the angular constable.

"Hi! keep back thar, you!" roared the man suspiciously, as he waved that gun of his menacingly. "I'm on to your tricks, and



I don't let yuh come within arms' length, if I knows it. Say what yuh got to say, and do it quick, too. Talkin' ain't goin' tuh do yuh any good, tell yuh that in the start. I cort yuh in the act—twenty-six miles an hour sense yuh crossed the town limits. Now what?"

"My friend, you look like a sensible man," began Alec, when the constable stopped him with a threatening movement, and what he was doubtless pleased to consider a frown of authority.

"None o' that soft-soap business, boy!" he exclaimed in his cracked voice. "Jest make up yer mind that I ain't a sensible man; I'm a constable, duly app'inted by the Justice, and here's my badge o' authority as represents the Majesty of the Law."

"Oh!" said Alec, "I beg your pardon, I must have made a mistake; but would you please tell me whether you held up a big touring car yesterday that must have passed through here. It held a single gentleman and his chauffeur. The owner was a little man, with side whiskers, and a very high voice. The car was a three-year-old pattern of an Alco, but he had had it touched up with the white streak along the top of the body



that marks the later cars of that make. Then you do remember it, Mr. Constable; I can see from your smile that it passed along here; and perhaps now you extracted a twenty-five spot from Judge Rollins, whom we have been sent to overtake in order to restore a valuable paper which he left behind him at my guardian's house in Staunton."

"Yes, I had the pleasure o' stopping that same car, if it'll dew yuh any good tuh know it, younker. The leetle gent was the maddest I seed this long while; sez he was a-goin' tuh test the right of any little one-hoss village to lay a trap to ketch tourists, and yank 'em afore a Squire, to be fined at will. But mark me, he had tuh go, all the same; an' he ponied up double price, on the additional charge of resistin' an officer in the discharge o' his duty."

He slapped his pocket when making this proud boast, just as if to proclaim that his share of the fine had found a restingplace where it would do him the most good.

"It's plain to be seen," remarked Alec, "that you are a most efficient officer, and doubtless the terror of your speed traps is extending far and wide; but in our case perhaps you might be tempted to accept



a little present and let us go on. It is of the utmost importance that we overtake that touring car before we stop tonight, and as it had a day's start of us, you can see we've just got to hustle, or own up beat. We're not racing at all, and you could salve your conscience, I am sure, by looking on it just as you would the haste of a doctor to get to his patient. The law recognizes his need of haste, and it protects him. There must be exceptions to every rule; and it seems to me this might be such a case."

Alec saw that his little scheme did not promise any good results, before he had half finished speaking. The angular constable drew himself up, and assumed a highly insulted attitude, with his chin thrust out belligerently.

"Stop right thar, young feller!" he exclaimed, with a great flourish of the hand, that held the megaphone. "Yuh forget that it means a double fine for tryin' to bribe an officer in the discharge o' his duty. I ain't tuh be corrupted. Arsk anybody thet lives within ten miles o' Squashville, an' they'll tell yuh Josh Slocum is as honest as the day is long. And now, arter I've sot my trap again, I reckons we'll perceed to town,



single file. And jest remember that I got the Law back o' me, an' if yuh 'tempts tuh 'scape I'll bust the tire o' yer machine fust; an' ef thet don't bring yuh tuh a stop, p'raps I'll be tempted tuh wing yuh in the leg. So be warned in time, and perceed accordingly."

Now Alec did not mean to go like a lamb to the slaughter, unless he could not possibly help it. He felt that this was a wholly unnecessary proceeding on the part of the country constable, and entered into simply to get money for himself and the Squire, with the town a poor third. This road did not really pass directly through Squashville, but skirted the place; and even though a motorcycle might be going at twenty miles an hour, there was really no danger of any one being injured thereby.

Alec was very much aroused. He looked upon that rawboned constable, who had all the earmarks of the stage species, though he was real enough, as a typical leech, out to make a fat living off unfortunate tourists who did not dream that they were near a town, and could be easily trapped.

And thinking thus, the boy felt that he would be within his rights in trying to baffle this hold-up game, if it could possibly be done.



Now, there had always been a little code of signals understood between the four chums, by means of which they were able to communicate without uttering a single word. They had found this understanding very convenient on numerous occasions in the past. More than once it had been the means of saving them from serious entanglements, and proved one of the best things Alec had ever gotten up.

So now he gave each of his three chums the secret sign, which consisted of two winks, first with the right eye, and then the left, that told them what his intentions were; and that each of them was to manage somehow to place himself in a position to jump on the constable when he gave another signal.

Meanwhile Josh Slocum had stepped back a pace, and by means of a little windlass he had cleverly constructed, raised the pole from across the road. That gave them a clear track, could they make sure that the constable would not be able to make use of that ugly pistol he carried, and which was really one of those old navy revolvers in use in Civil War times.

“Naow, fall in line, yeou fellers, and forward march tuh town. Jest remember as



haow I'm keeping yuh under my eagle eye, an' if yuh tries tuh jump me it's goin' tuh be the wust thing yuh ever did. I'm considered a very dangerous man tuh tackle I gives yuh fair warnin'. Git along with yuh, naow!"

It was evidently the constable's hour of triumph, and he was enjoying himself hugely. But his wings were fated to be soon clipped. Alec had seen a splendid opportunity to bridge over the chasm, and was quick to take advantage of it.

The rope connected with the tackle which hauled the heavy pole into an upright position chanced to be lying just on the other side of the tall constable's feet. One end was within reach of Alec, who, by pretending to stoop down, as he held on to his wheel, could suddenly grasp hold of it.

This he did without a second's warning, and gave the rope a jerk with all his might. The coil flew up, caught against the shins of the lanky constable, and in a flash his heels went up in the air, the megaphone flying one way, and the ugly firearm another, while he landed on his back with a heavy thud.

Jack and Freckles had been quick to see what was coming. The way they dropped



their motorcycles, and leaped upon the constable, was worth while seeing. And thus in a twinkling the situation was exactly reversed; for Budge had raced after both the pistol and the megaphone, and was bringing them to Alec, with a grin of satisfaction and pride on his rosy face, as though it tickled him immensely to know that after all he had had a hand in the little circus.



## CHAPTER VI

## THE BITER BITTEN

"Let him get up, boys!" said Alec, as soon as he had possession of the dangerous weapon.

"Yes," added Budge, swelling out with importance, "we're ready for him now. We've drawn his teeth, all right, you notice!"

Accordingly Jack and Freckles gave a spring and were back at their machines, over which they bent with some solicitude, to make sure no damage had been done when they were so hastily dropped.

Growling awfully the lanky country constable managed to scramble to his feet. He was as black as a thundercloud, because never before had he been caught napping by any of the unfortunate drivers of cars which he had stopped with his clever little speed trap; and to think that after all he had been outwitted by a parcel of half-grown boys made it all the worse.

As soon, therefore, as he had gained his feet, he started to rush the boys.



"Stop right where you are, or I won't answer for the consequences!" shouted Alec; and there was such a world of menace in his voice that somehow the angry man did halt in his tracks.

"Hi! what d'ye mean a-threatenin' an officer in the discharge o' his juty?" he stammered. "Doan't yuh know as haow yuh make yer-self liable tuh a heavy fine and imprisonment by thet ere act? Put daown thet gun, boy when I tells yuh!"

He might as well have been talking to the wind, for Alec did not give the first sign of meaning to obey this order.

"Now, keep cool, Mr. Officer," said Freckles, "and we won't hurt you; but if you try any of your funny business on us, you're liable to go back to town hopping on one leg. You don't get any fine out of this crowd after the way you treated us. We told you only the truth, and that it was mighty important for us to overtake that touring car. We offered you the fine we'd have to pay, just to let us get away without losing any time, and you spurned it; not because you was above taking a bribe, oh! no, but just I guess you felt that we might tell about it later on, and the good people of this hold-up town



would know you for what you are, a grafter. That'll do for you, Mr. Josh Slocum; go away back, and sit down!"

The badgered constable seemed to have lost considerable of his prancing ways. He no longer jumped around like an animated rooster, crowing over his beaten foe. In fact, as he stared first at Freckles, then each of the other boys in turn, and ending up with Alec, covering him so neatly with that enormous weapon, he seemed to shrivel up considerably, and when he said "by heck!" it was in a subdued tone of voice.

"Just turn around and walk along the road a little ways, Officer," commanded Alec, waving his weapon to indicate the direction meant.

"What yuh a-goin' tuh do with me?" asked the other, looking a bit worried, as if he had begun to fear lest they should march him into town that way, and wind up his usefulness as an Officer of the Law.

"Walk along till you get to that leaning tree; then you can stop," continued Alec, "by that time we'll all be off, and you won't have a chance to play a second trick on us."

"But say, yuh ain't a-meanin' tuh rob me o' my gun, be yuh?" pleaded the constable.



"Oh!" said the motorcycle boy, easily, "if you follow along the road after we're off, you'll find it easy enough. I wouldn't like to be caught with such a cannon about me nut for a good deal. Now, move along, and be quick about it. And after this, listen to reason when some one tells you a hard-luck story. It would have paid you to have taken up our offer."

"Wisht I had, an' if it ain't too late naow, mister——" began the repentant constable, when Alec interrupted him by saying:

"It's all off, and we're going to play the game to suit our own hand. Get ready boys, for a flying start; I'll bring up the rear for a little while," and Alec waved his hand to his chums as he spoke in this manner.

He saw the constable, after reaching the tree mentioned, quickly turned and watched every movement he made. And Alec knew that the fellow was hoping still that some little slip in the arrangements might allow him to recover possession of his weapon, in time to hold at least the leader of the audacious quartette who had snapped their fingers at the stern Majesty of the Law, his shining nickel badge of authority represented.



But Alec did not mean that there should be any slip.

One by one his chums got off, and now it was Alec's turn. He was astride his machine, since it was no longer necessary for them to make the little run that used to be the rule with all motorcycle riders when starting. When both his hands were engaged, and he had thrust the big revolver in his belt temporarily, he saw the constable start on a rush toward him.

Then, with a loud laugh, Alec was away, his motor sending back derisive snorting sounds as if to exult over the baffled constable. The man, realizing that he could never hope to overtake the swift pacer, presently came to a stop, and forming his hands into a cup to take the place of his megaphone, he bawled lustily:

"Jest yuh wait, an' I'll make it hot enuff for yuh when comin' back this way!"

But this threat had no terrors for the boy, since he had already decided that they would give Squashville a wide berth on their return, even if they had to cover twenty additional miles to do so. And doubtless, in due time this policy of trapping tourists would cause every car to shun the town, which in the long



run would lose many times the amount of money gained through fines.

Half a mile further on Alec, true to his promise, dropped the big pistol where Josh Slocum could recover it; though he really felt that he would be justified in hurling the weapon into the brush alongside the road.

He came upon the rest of the party a few miles further on. They had stopped at a fork in the road, not knowing which way they ought to follow, and wishing Alec to glimpse the mark of the patched tire, so as to make sure they were right.

This he quickly did, and they started again, with Alec now in the lead as pacemaker. Budge was brimming over with excitement, and wanted to talk about their recent adventure, which seemed to have filled him with unwonted glee; but this could not be done without a waste of time; and in their present desire to make haste such a thing was not to be considered for a moment.

At the next village they made inquiries about the "friend" they were following, and were gratified to learn that the car with the white streak along the upper edge of the body had passed through about two o'clock on the preceding afternoon.



As it was now not yet eleven they realized that they were doing finely, with good prospects of overtaking Judge Rollins some time that evening, should all go well, and no other road trap be sprung unexpected upon them, to consume precious time, as well as reduce their supply of cash.

When it came noon they were beginning to get hungry, after having had such an early breakfast; but for some reason Alec kept right along. Budge called out several times to ask what they expected to do about it; but somehow no one seemed to be taking the least interest in dining save himself, for they did not answer his appeals.

Had the others been close enough for conversation no doubt Budge might have waxed eloquent on the subject of the great harm that comes from going without a regular meal, when all your life you have been accustomed to such a thing. As it was, Budge was between the two mill stones; he had to either go on, and forget that his stomach was fairly clamoring for a supply of food; or else drop out, and let his four chums keep up the run without him; and Budge was so set upon keeping them company to the bitter end, that he would even sacrifice a meal if necessary,



though it did come hard on a poor fellow.

One o'clock, and Budge was groaning with every mile they skimmed over, up-hill and down. Once he dropped back until he could shout to Freckles; but he received poor consolation from that worthy, who declared that Alec was setting the pace, and therefore the rest of them could not object; though perhaps Alec many have seen a tavern marked on his road map as a good place for tourists to stop in order to get dinner; and that was why he kept on hitting up the pace in such a steady way.

"Oh! I hope that's what it means!" was what Budge told himself, as he once more started to regain the position he knew he was expected to keep, half-way between Jack and the tail-ender, so as to better avoid any sort of collision.

Ten minutes more, and the anxious eyes of Budge detected signs of a coming town, which made him indulge in renewed hope. Oh! if Alec would only feel the pangs of hunger just as he did, how quickly would he decide to stop for half an hour, and pick up a good dinner.

Yes, he was slackening his terrific speed even now, and there seemed to be some little



hope in that. How eagerly was Budge straining his ears to catch the welcome notes of that little bugle which the pacemaker carried, and which would proclaim the glad tidings that they were to take a rest. He was beginning to wobble a little in his saddle, and just knew that he could not hold out much longer unless the inner man was fortified with a substantial meal.

Now they were beginning to enter the outskirts of what seemed to be some place of fair importance, which must be marked on Alec's road map.

And just when Budge was beginning to groan again, thinking because they had passed one hotel, that Alec was only tantalizing him, he heard the most delightful of all sounds—the sweet notes of the bugle announcing a halt.

One-fifteen, and all was well, with dinner in prospect; no wonder, then, the motorcycle boys felt that they had reason to congratulate themselves.



## CHAPTER VII

## PICKING UP INFORMATION

"We ought to find out something here about Judge Rollins," said Alec, as his three chums came up, one by one, and dismounted from their machines; though Budge was so stiff that he managed to "fall all over himself" as Freckles called it, and only kept his heavy motorcycle from smashing down on top of him by next door to a miracle.

"Oh! but ain't we going to dine here too, Alec?" pleaded the fat boy, turning a beseeching face on the leader, as though he would beg of him to consider that in order to keep up such terrific riding it was necessary to take nourishment.

"Yes, we'll see if we can get dinner, I guess, Budge," came the welcome reply.

"Good for you, Alec!" cried the anxious Budge. "I thought you wouldn't keep me away from my regular meal much longer. Course I expected that you knew about an extra good place to eat at, and was hitting



up the pace to get there. Say, but we did come along at a corking fast rate, the last half-hour. Seemed to me I'd gone and grown a pair of wings, and was just flying. Lucky the road was as good as it turned out to be."

"If it had been anything else I wouldn't have led you on that way," Alec observed, quietly. "We take chances enough without racing over a bad stretch of road. But let's stand our wheels over here, where they'll be out of the way, and go in to see about dinner."

And from the quick way in which Jack and Freckles managed to get their motorcycles "stood up" before Budge was able to accomplish the same feat, it looked as if there might be other hungry fellows in the party besides the fat boy, even if they had a faculty for hiding the fact.

Just at the door of the taproom they met the proprietor of the tavern, which on the chart possessed by Alec was marked as a very good road-house, where especial pains were taken to serve travelers. And having such a sponsor back of him was the finest advertisement the proprietor of the place could ever



dream of possessing, for it brought him considerable custom.

Why there were two cars in the yard right then, and as soon as the boys got in the dining-room they found the occupants still at the table, and evidently enjoying the meal set before them.

Alec hurried a little more than he would have done under ordinary conditions; for he wanted a chance to speak with the tavern-keeper while Budge was finishing, because they could not expect such a hearty eater to get through as soon as the others.

"Take another five minutes or so, boys," Alec remarked, as later on he arose to pass out, "I want to buzz the proprietor a little, so don't be in too big a hurry. If you hang out too long, I'll give the jump signal."

So saying he left them still gorging, as though they thought they had better lay in a good supply, since no one could say where or when they would be able to get their next meal.

Alec found the proprietor in the taproom, and quickly settled for the dinners of the party.

"I imagine that you hardly have a day pass without one or more cars stopping here



for meals?" he remarked, to break the ice, and open up a little talk-fest that might prove profitable to him in the end.

"That's right, son; and sometimes as many as four cars can be seen parked out in the wagon-yard that used to be. They seem to like what they get here, and tell all their friends, I have the same people come again and again. Some of 'em ride twenty miles out of their way just to dine here."

The hotel man evidently took considerable pride in this fact, nor did Alec believe that he was overstating the truth in what he said.

"That's the best way to succeed in such a business, I should think," he remarked. "And by the way, a friend of ours is somewhere ahead of us, and we're trying to overtake him if we can. He is in a touring car that has a white rim around the upper part of the body, and his name is Judge Rollins, a small man, rather excitable. Perhaps you remember seeing him, because he must have passed along this way yesterday afternoon."

The innkeeper smiled, and nodded his head, as he replied:

"He was here, all right, and as you say, seemed a sort of excitable little gentleman, from the way he railed at some fool country



sheriff who laid a speed trap for him along the road, hauled him before a Squire, and then struck him for fifty dollars, half of it for violating the speed ordinance of the town, and the rest for resisting an officer of the law in the discharge of his sworn duty."

"Yes, we ran across that same constable, and he stopped us with a long pole he had a way of throwing across the road, just like they do at toll-gates," Alec went on to say.

"Then it cost you twenty-five apiece, did it?" asked the other, with a grin.

"Not one cent," answered the leader of the motorcycle club.

"How did that come?" demanded the tavern keeper, curiosity gripping him.

"Well, we thought he was overdoing it when he refused to take the money for the fine, and let us hurry along, after we told him how important it was that we catch up with the touring car by night time; so we tripped him up, took his pistol away, and left him behind when we made a fresh start."

That account put the hotel man in a good humor, as Alec had anticipated it would, which was one reason he had for telling the story of their adventure with the road-speed trap officer.



"Would you mind telling me when Judge Rollins left your place?" he asked, quietly.

"Well, I think it was about nine o'clock," came the reply.

"Last night?" Alec went on, puzzled to account for such an unexpected answer.

"Oh! no, this morning," the tavern-keeper remarked, pleasantly; just as though it might be the customary thing for a tourist stopping late in the afternoon to be unable to tear himself away in a hurry from a house where he was served such good meals.

That pleased Alec very much. Here it was not much more than half-past one, and yet they had managed to cover all the ground which the gentleman in the big touring car had done on the entire preceding day. If that ratio could only be maintained they ought surely overtake him before stopping for the next night.

"Oh! then he spent the night with you, did he?" he went on to say. "And when he left this morning I suppose he kept right along, headed into the north—did you happen to notice that, sir?"

"Yes, I chanced to be standing outside at the time, and said goodbye to Judge Rollins. He certain took the road leading north from



here; and that was what I told the other gent not more'n an hour back."

Alec pricked up his ears at hearing this.

"I don't quite understand what you mean by that?" he remarked.

"Why, you see, there was another car come along, a regular speed-eater, I guess, from her looks, with a gentleman all alone in the same. I don't know what he was like, for he never took off his goggles while he was a-talkin' with me. But he asked about that car with the white streak on the body, just like you done; and said as how Judge Rollins was a very dear friend of his'n, and that he wanted to overtake him as quick as he could, because it was mighty important. He threw me a dollar bill for just one drink, and told me to keep the change."

"And then he went off along the same road as Judge Rollins, did he?" said Alec, who was feeling not a little bewildered by this new and entirely unanticipated development in the case; for he could not give the first guess as to the identity of the unknown driver of the racing car in pursuit of Judge Rollins.

"The last I saw was a cloud of dust up that way, and I reckon he was hitting it up nigh on fifty an hour, if he was five. That car



was built for the motordome and not for touring it on the road. It was low, and looked like a ram. Why, honest now, when I got to thinking about it later on, I kind of had a little cold creep over me. Seemed like it might be a sort of road pirate a-drivin' that car; but he met his match in that same country constable, for he said he was held up, and had to pay over his little fine, as well as lose a valuable hour besides."

It was only natural that Alec should laugh when he heard this.

"That same country constable is sure a corker, when it comes to holding folks up," he remarked.

"But he met his match when you boys came along, seems like," added the landlord, meaningly.

"The odds were too much for him, I guess," said Alec, "four to one you know; and it's pretty hard work keeping tab on four active fellows all at the same time. But I'm much obliged to you for the information you've given me."

"Then you ain't any idee who the man in the little racing machine was?" questioned the other, evidently rather curious himself to know the identity of the party who had



scorned to take change from a dollar bill, and acted as though he considered the information received more than worth the difference.

"I don't know of anybody that owns such a car," replied the boy, "but then Judge Rollins has lots of friends, of course, and this may be some one he knows very well. But here come my chums; and we'll be on the move again."

"You'll have to do some tall hustling, son, if you expect to catch up with Judge Rollins before sundown," ventured the innkeeper, as the four motorcycle boys began to get their machines ready for action.

"If the roads keep as decent as we've found them so far, and nothing happens to delay us, we have hopes of doing that same," Alec declared.

In three minutes more they were streaking it quietly out of town, following in regular order, with Alec making the pace again, and Freckles guarding the rear, after his usual custom.

What the innkeeper had so casually let fall regarding that mysterious stranger gave Alec considerable cause for thought. He could not for the life of him guess who the party could be. Certainly it was no one who



had passed them on the road, or they would have remembered the car; which, according to the statement of the hotel man, was so peculiar in its construction that it must have attracted their attention.

He evidently knew that Judge Rollins was making this trip; and was doing everything in his power to overtake the gentleman, possibly with the idea of having an interview with him.

And as they reeled off the miles in systematic order, Alec allowed his thoughts to roam back to these things, wondering meanwhile whether they would ever know the identity of this party in the racer, what his business in pursuing Judge Rollins so determinedly might be; and a lot of other things that just came trooping along in their train.

It was possibly an hour later that he was aroused by hearing a loud whoop from the rear, that, according to their coee of signals, meant trouble.



## CHAPTER VIII

## BUDGE FALLS INTO OLD WAYS

No sooner had Alec caught that sound of woe than he shut off power, and applied the brake. There was no space in which to turn, so that after coming to a full stop he had to jump off and turning his heavy motorcycle around, once more start back again.

All this took a minute or more of time; but once he got underway he quickly arrived at the scene of the trouble. He felt nervous when hurrying back, not knowing but what a serious accident had happened; and whenever Budge was along, his three mates were always more or less concerned about his welfare, since he had such a faculty for getting into all sorts of scrapes.

As soon as he glimpsed the picture Alec knew what had happened. The other two were doing the same old stunt that had been enacted several times in the past—helping Budge to crawl out of a bed of muck that bordered a marsh.



It just seemed as though Budge could not look at such a place without becoming possessed of a fatal fascination to explore the same. Young riders on the wheel have experienced the same type of strange drawing power; they see a gully on one side, and their intention is to keep as far away as possible from the same; and yet it seems as though some magnet just drew them straight for the hole.

As usual Budge had left his motorcycle as soon as it struck the soft ooze, and after describing a complete circle through the air, sat down in the mud as though he liked it.

Freckles had seen him going, and let out that call for help, well knowing that a rescue party would be the next thing in order.

By making use of long poles, and all sorts of other things, Budge was gradually drawn to a point near the shore, where he could help himself. When he came dripping out on to the road he was a sight to behold; and to cap the climax he even tried to grin good-naturedly through the patches of mud on his red face.

Freckles immediately doubled up like a hinge; nor was his laughter of the silent type either, for you could have surely heard him half a mile away.



"Laugh away if it does you any good, Freckles," observed Budge, as he cleared his mouth of some more mud that had found its way in there, "I suppose I'll have to put up with it, because you were very kind to come and help me out. And now, Jack, will you please get a stick, and scrape me off the best way you can."

"I hope you didn't hurt yourself, Budge?" remarked Alec, kindly.

"Oh! I never do, you know," was the cheerful reply. "I'm getting so used to this silly thing now, that I seem to be able to just slip out of the saddle as easy as you could lift up your hand; and then the next thing, plunk I come down in the middle of the bog, with a splash. And I think I'm improving on that splash, too; seems like I get it down pat each time. But it's getting kind of monotonous. I think I've explored as many as six muck holes since I took to riding. Get all you can please, Jack, that's a good fellow; the rest can dry, and then I'll knock it off. And Alec, won't you look at my machine? I hope it ain't put out of commish. Nice joke on me if I had to walk about seven miles to the nearest village."

He waited anxiously for the other to report;



and no doubt in imagination already saw himself trooping wearily along, mile after mile, pushing that heavy motorcycle, which, when in condition for service may be a joy indeed, but under adverse circumstances may become an Old Man of the Sea, such as perched on the back of Sindbad the Sailor, and refused to get down, so that he had to be carried.

"Seems to be all right, as far as I can find out," declared Alec, presently, after he had wiped off some of the encrusted mud, and standing the machine up, started the engine to working.

"Oh! good! good! you don't know how relieved I feel when I hear that jolly old hum again. Isn't it wonderful how many times that bucking broncho has gone and thrown me, and neither of us has had as much as a broken spoke, or sprocket, or anything like that."

Freckles laughed again at that; it is astonishing how little is needed sometimes to make a boy see things in a funny light. Now, of course, Budge did not mean that he had a spoke or a sprocket, but the application was plain; he had escaped with whole ribs, and a sound head and arms, in spite of his numerous



accidents; because he always seemed to pick out a soft spot to drop on.

They could not waste much time cleaning the fat boy off.

"It'll soon dry with the wind you get on the run," declared Jack, "and then you can rub it off. There's Alec getting ready to make another start. We've lost ten precious minutes here."

"Well, ain't it worth that just to see me come up out of the muck like a Neptune?" demanded Budge, as he prepared to start off again in his turn.

"I'd give it any day, Budge," remarked Freckles.

"Oh! would you?" muttered the other, as if in doubt whether to consider this a compliment or not.

"Only if I was you I tell you what I'd do after this," continued the lanky one.

"Well, why don't you go on and tell me, then, Freckles?"

"I'd get me some nice leather at a cobblers, and make a pair of blinders."

"Blinders? Now, what in the dickens do you mean?" demanded Budge, indignantly.

"Why, like they put on horses that are apt to shy at things," continued Freckles.



"Oh! you would, eh?" muttered Budge.

"If you was wearing the same, when you came to one of these pesky mudholes, you wouldn't see it, and so you wouldn't have that crazy notion to tumble in," the tall boy went on to say.

Budge looked daggers at him, and then, as if realizing that it was foolish to take offense, finally smiled sweetly as he replied:

"Well, now that ain't such a bad idea after all, Freckles, for you; and perhaps I might take it up one of these days. I'm getting tired of this mud party myself, and the more I try to keep from aiming straight at such a hole, the more I seem to head for it. It beats the Dutch. Yes, I'll think it over, Freckles."

With the last word Budge was off, amid a wild popping racket that seemed to be sweet music in his ears.

Twenty minutes later and another halt was called, but this time no one was in any trouble; they had come suddenly on another fork of the road, and Alec wanted to make sure that the trail followed the left branch, as he supposed would be the case, as it was by long odds the better one of the two.

"That man in the racer must have known about that patched tire, too; because he's



followed the right track," was the comment of the leader, when they had made an examination.

Once more they were off, and pursuing their course diligently, with mile after mile put behind them. They exercised due caution when drawing near any town, lest they be caught in some speed trap, and forced to languish in jail for a certain number of hours, until the justice had taken his afternoon nap, and was ready to sit upon the case.

Once when they were comparing notes as to about how long before the marks of the tire had been made, and Freckles declared that they would have several more hours of daylight to work in, when Budge startled the rest by remarking:

"Daylight! Huh! what's the matter with our just keeping everlastingly at it after the sun's gone down? We're in this for keeps, ain't we? And don't forget that we're going to have a moon that's nearly full tonight. Alec, how about that; can't we do some of this here tracking business by moonlight?"

"Well, now, I reckon you're about right, Budge, and the idea does you credit, because it tells that you have pluck, all right. You're a sport, Budge, that's what. Yes, the moon



will give us enough light to see how to drive if we're careful; and when in doubt, why, it's easy to drop off, strike a match, and take a look for the mark of the patched tire."

"He's getting real fresh," declared Freckles, "and his mind seems to be working overtime nowadays. Think what it'll be when he's taken a few more headers into all the rest of the swamp holes on the road. My! there won't be any keeping in the same class with Budge if this goes on."

Nevertheless the fat boy felt amply repaid by those few words of commendation from the leader; he would go to considerable pains to hear Alec say "well done, good and faithful servant!" for secretly Budge thought the other the finest all-round fellow going; and in his own simple way he often tried to pattern after him, though with but meagre success, it must be admitted, because he was not built that way.

Throughout the entire afternoon the motorcycle boys kept on; and whenever they came to what seemed a dangerous piece of ground for Budge, word of warning was sent down along the line, and the pace abated, so that he could turn his head aside from the temptation, and pass in safety.



His success in accomplishing this a few times gave the fat boy more or less satisfaction, and confidence in himself; but he was warned by both Jack and Freckles not to think of taking any undue chances. Some time, the latter solemnly warned him, he would fail to turn completely over while in the air, and as a consequence might plunge head down into the muck, from which he would never be able to escape.

The day was drawing near an end. Although Alec had not mentioned anything about it to his friends, he was keeping an anxious eye toward the northwest, where he had discovered clouds hovering in a suspicious way. Yes, and there was now an actual tang in the air, that told of a cold wave coming. Perhaps right then and there the long continued mild spell that the oldest inhabitant could not remember being beaten, was about to be ended, and with a rip-roaring cold snowstorm that would make a record in that part of the country.

It was about sundown when Budge began to grow wabbly again. When Jack, glancing back, saw it, and asked the reason, of course he was told that Budge had again commenced to feel the weakness that with him always



followed a lack of food. Alec must have got wind of the state of affairs, for he gave the stop signal; and when the others came up, they found him busily engaged lighting a fire.

"I chance to guess that Budge is carrying our coffee pot among some other odds and ends in his bundles," was what Alec said, "and I thought that if we're bound to make a night ride, we ought to have a warm snack. So here goes. Anybody raise any objection?"

Of course there was not a whimper raised; for the other fellows were feeling more or less chilled themselves about that time.

Pretty soon there was a cheery blaze, around which the boys gathered, some to warm their fingers, while others assisted in getting the coffee going. Lo and behold, if that wizard of a Budge did not produce a real fryingpan, and then several thick slices of fine home-cured ham, at sight of which there was a shout.

"And let me tell you that fire feels mighty good, because the air ain't as balmy as June right now!" Freckles declared, as he rubbed his hands before the crackling flames, and assisted in watching that the coffee didn't boil over.

"And," put in Budge, reflectively, "don't



it remind you of fires we've had, boys, down in Mexico, up in the Adirondacks, and then, last of all, away out in the National Park of the Yellowstone."

"You're just right it does, Budge, old man," asserted Jack. "And queer as it may seem, these fires feel just as good, no matter where you are. I'll never forget the first one we sat around, when the motorcycle club was in its infancy, and we had to endure the persecution of that town bully, Gid Staples."

So they got to bringing up many reminiscences while they waited for supper to be cooked; and as these four enterprising lads had been through considerable scenes of excitement in common, they might have kept the ball rolling for hours without entirely exhausting the subject.

But supper was pronounced done; and then, with appetites considerably sharpened by the change in the weather, they set to work doing justice to the little spread.

When they got through there was not much left of what had seemed a bountiful supply before they started. But then all were satisfied, and voted the meal a grand success.

"Guess that ought to fix us for a spell of night riding," remarked Freckles, as he actu-



ally let out his belt a couple of notches, just as though it might have felt a little uncomfortable.

"Wait a few minutes for me, fellers," complained Budge, who still had his mouth crammed full, and with half a cup of coffee was just "topping off," as he called it; "I'll be done in three shakes of a lamb's tail, sure I will."

"Don't you believe that Budge ever gets done so long as there's another round of grub left to tackle," ventured Freckles, as he started in the direction of the nearby tree, against which they had stood all their motorcycles, as the most convenient spot, while they were getting supper.

This was about thirty feet or more distant from the fire; because Alec was most careful about having gasoline around where sparks were flying. He had once known of a serious accident from a little carelessness that way, and did not want to have such a thing happen to himself or chums.

Budge was just in the act of raising his tin cup to his mouth when a sudden loud cry from Freckles caused his hand to waver half way; while Jack and Alec jumped to their feet in alarm.



“Here, you, where you going with that wheel? Drop it, you rascal! Hi! Alec—Jack, here’s trouble for you! We’re being robbed! A thief is getting away with one of our machines; and sure as you live I believe it’s my Cannonball Limited. Help! help!”



## CHAPTER IX

## AN ADVENTURE ON THE ROAD

As they had had former experiences along just this same line both Alec and Jack knew instantly what to do. Budge was incapable of motion, because of his having eaten so much; besides, it took some little time as a rule for a thing to work through his slow brain. Why, he was sitting there still, with that cup half way up to his mouth, and just staring for all that was out. Had it depended on Budge to recover the missing motorcycle, the chances are that one of the boys would have been compelled to finish his journey on foot.

But the other three were active fellows. They started on the jump after the runaway wheel, and with all manner of outcries that alone should have alarmed the intended robber.

The dusk of early evening had settled down, so that it was not easy to see things as clearly as earlier in the day; but all of them sighted



the moving motorcycle, and could see a figure stalking alongside.

When they started on a wild run after him, the intended thief tried to hasten his steps; but pushing that heavy machine caused this to be a matter of considerable difficulty. Possibly he knew nothing about the working of a motor, for he did not make the first move to leap into the saddle, and switch on the power, as an expert might have done. Instead, upon finding that the three ardent pursuers were rapidly overhauling him, the fellow turned into the woods, abandoned his glittering prize on the border, and vanished from view himself like a shadow.

A few seconds later Freckles was anxiously examining his property, and growling all manner of things in connection with the audacity of the intended theft.

"Main thing is, has it been hurt by that tumble?" asked Jack, right to the point as usual.

"Don't seem to be anything serious—a few dents perhaps, though I haven't seen 'em, and can only guess," replied the owner.

"Well, then, forget it, and thank your lucky stars it wasn't any worse," Jack went on to say. "Supposing now, nobody had



seen the fellow, wouldn't it have given you a worse shock not to find your wheel at the tree, and perhaps never see it any more?"

"Let's get back to the fire," suggested Alec, sensibly, as he started off.

"Sure thing," added Jack, "how do we know but what this was all only a bluff to draw most of us away, so that they could steal the three other machines?"

"Aw! wouldn't we a-heard Budge yelping if anything like that had happened?" the lanky one remarked.

But the very thought had given the others a scare, so that they started off on the full run, this time heading back to where the fire gleamed near by.

"It's all right," gasped Alec, who was in the van, "I can see Budge there, and the machines still stand under the tree."

"But what is Budge doing?" asked Jack.

"Looks like he'd got a move on him after we cut stick, and has pulled something out from his traps. Would you believe me, Jack, it's a gun of some kind too. Who'd think our peaceful Budge would think to fetch that thing along?"

"Look again, Alec, don't you recognize it?" Jack chuckled.



"Why, I do believe it's his ammonia pistol that he got to shoo dogs away when they come out barking at his heels as he's riding along the road. But in the hands of an expert, an ammonia pistol is better than a six-shooting gun. And tell, me, did you ever see a finer picture of true valor than Budge standing guard over our motorcycles with that awful weapon pointing first this way and then that, as he thinks he sees shadowy forms stealing up on him?"

"It's just great; hold up a minute, Alec, and let Freckles feast his eyes on the sight. Watch Budge look savage. I think he can just glimpse us, for he's standing this way now, and aiming his pistol at us."

"What's all this blooming row about?" asked Freckles, coming swiftly up just at that moment, and trundling his machine alongside.

"It's Budge," said Jack; "look at him standing guard, and never say another word to question his bravery. Pity the fellow who tries to steal another of our wheels, for he'll rub up against trouble. Why, he's as ferocious as they make them."

"But what's that he's got; looks like a gun; and he might blaze away at us?" ex-



claimed Freckles, really alarmed as he saw the fat boy bringing his hand on a level several times.

"It's that old squirt-gun of his, the one that shoots ammonia, you remember," and when Jack had said this Freckles heaved a sigh of relief.

"Stand where you are!" called out Budge just then. "Don't think I see you, hey? I've got you covered, and if you so much as come a single step nearer, I'm going to fill you all full of lead. Now, I'll count five, and if you don't skip out at the end of that time you'll just have to take your medicine, hear that?"

He started in a loud, solemn voice to begin to count.

"What d'ye know about that?" whooped Freckles, unable to contain himself any longer; and as the three dim figures started to push forward, despite the awful threat of the defender of the motorcycles, of course Budge soon realized that instead of a pack of robbers, he was dealing with his chums.

"Oh! it's only you, is it?" he called out, quietly, yet in evident relief. "Then I guess I won't waste my precious ammunition after all," with which he hastened to thrust the



pistol out of sight, and taking up his tin cup started in once more to finish his coffee.

A hasty examination by the light of the fire convinced Freckles that no damage worth mentioning had resulted as a consequence of his motorcycle being so violently thrown down. Fortunately these up-to-date machines are so cleverly constructed that they can stand considerable knocking around without getting out of condition.

"Yes, I guess I c'n call myself mighty lucky," he declared when this fact was impressed upon his mind.

"But whoever was it, do you think?" demanded Budge, wiping his mouth, and then calmly proceeding to gather up the tin dishes, the cups, the fryingpan and coffeepot, as though time counted for little just then.

Alec assisted him, for he also was impatient to be off. The moon shone in the heavens, and promised to afford them plenty of light, unless those clouds that Alec had noticed along the horizon chose to creep up, and cut off the supply later on.

"Well, we can only give a guess at that, Budge," Jack remarked, "because, you see, he didn't wait to be interviewed. Just as soon as he saw that we were going to over-



haul him he dropped the wheel, and plunged into the brush. We might have chased after him, only we didn't think it wise. In the first place we hadn't the time to spare; and then we felt a bit uneasy about leaving you alone here with the other wheels."

"Yes," put in Freckles, "if we'd only known how you were loaded for bear we might a-gone after him, lickety-split, and overhauled the skunk."

"But who d'ye think he was?" persisted Budge, who having set his mind on getting information, could not be easily daunted, or shunted off on another track.

"We haven't had time to even give a stab at it," Freckles went on to say. "But chances are, we're not far away from a village right now, and some boys must have seen us stop here, and crept up to find out what sort of wheels these were. P'raps, now, they never saw a motorcycle before. Anyhow, one of 'em couldn't keep from tryin' to make off with my bully Cannonball Limited. Wow! another close shave; and it ain't the first one by a long shot. Seems like there's something about a shiny motorcycle that ain't to be resisted. Tramps take to 'em, and the boys just can't keep their paws off when



they think there's a chance to hook an Indian or a Reading Standard."

"Oh! well, no use crying till your milk is spilled," said Jack, soothingly.

"And a miss is as good as a mile," added Alec, as he stowed some of the traps away, while Budge held the waterproof bag open to receive them.

"Yes," the fat boy took occasion himself to say reprovingly, "and you've got good reason to be thankful that I didn't get rattled and give you all a few shots out of my ammonia gun. Think how you'd be jumping around, and howling, right now, if you had the vapor in your eyes. Good thing I kept my wits about me, you see."

"It sure was," admitted Freckles, humbly, but at the same time giving Jack a sly wink, "and it's a great thing to be able to keep what wits you've got. We've learned some things we never knew before, all of us, and that's one of 'em. How about it, Alec, are we ready to move along now?"

Budge looked hard at the lanky chum, as though not quite sure what he meant by these words; but as there was a general movement about that time, he thought it best not to continue the argument.



Truth to tell, Budge was worrying a little about that ride by moonlight. He was not as keen of vision as his companions, and actually carried a pair of spectacles in his pocket right then and there, which he ought to be using, since it had been discovered that Budge was near-sighted; but somehow he hated to show them to his comrades, particularly Freckles, who would be sure to guy him unmercifully; and Budge was a bit sensitive.

But then it was to be hoped that Alec would set rather a moderate pace, and not go flying like mad over these country roads, where the shadows of the trees made all sorts of fantastic figures across the dusty highway.

"Now, this is something we've seldom attempted," warned Alec, as he stood, prepared to start, "and we want to be extra careful so that we can avoid accidents. I'm going to start off at a snail's pace, and with our searchlights going, I guess we'll be able to keep away from each other. Keep your ears as well as your eyes on the alert for signals."

"Is that all, Alec?" asked Budge, trying to appear perfectly calm, though truth to tell his heart was beating faster than its wont, with apprehension.



"For the present, yes. And if you hear me give one sharp blast, it means I've come to another fork, where we'll have to stop, dismount, and look to see if the marked tire has kept on the right road or the left. All ready now?"

"Yep!" chirped Freckles, cheerily.

"Make a start, Alec," said Jack.

"We're after you like hot cakes," announced Budge; just as if this might be an undertaking that appealed especially to his heart, when, if the truth were known, the stout boy would ten times rather be lying alongside a comfortable fire, toasting his shins, and dreaming of what he would like to have for breakfast.

So with a rattle of the exhaust Alec was off along the road; and as soon as he had secured a certain vantage Jack followed him. Then Budge with grim visage brought up the next in line, and managed to secure a fair start; while Freckles brought up the rear.

In this order, then, did they depart from the scene of their supper, and the attempted theft of Freckles' motorcycle, and once more the club was on the jump, with the future an uncertain blank before them.



## CHAPTER X

## A STARTLING DISCOVERY

There was one thing the motorcycle boys had done before starting out afresh, and this was to light their lamps. Each machine was provided with an acetylene gas searchlight of considerable power. When this was in use the road ahead would be brilliantly illuminated, so that obstacles of any size were apt to be discovered in time to avoid them, or else pull up.

Budge had begged the pacemaker to go slow, now that night had arrived, and in asking this the stout boy had several good reasons.

He could not get it out of his head that they were apt to run into another of those speed traps; and to hear Budge talk one would believe that the whole country was filled with sheriffs and constables, lying in wait to get a slice of the money that was in the club strong box.

Then again, Budge was nervous whenever



the shadows began to thicken. He imagined all sorts of queer things as objecting to their passage. The zigzag shade of a limb connected with a dead tree had all the appearance of a big snake obstructing the road; and Budge would feel just like bringing his machine to a sudden and perhaps disastrous halt, for fear of running over it.

But then Alec expected all this, and really had no desire to hit up a fast pace when he started out again. They must be content to run along smoothly, and every little while come to a halt in order to find out if they were still on the track of the big touring car in which the New York financier sat, with his chauffeur.

After all they had not gone more than two miles, it seemed, before Alec gave the signal for a halt.

One by one the others came along, until all were on the spot and dismounted. It was rather a strange sight to see four motorcycles grouped there, with searchlights glowing brightly, and the riders looking spectre-like in the background.

"What's the good word, Alec?" asked Freckles, who of course was the last to arrive.

"Another fork in the road, that's all; and



I've already found out which way he kept along," was the quick reply; for Alec had leaned his motorcycle up against a friendly tree, and looked around, while waiting for the rest to arrive.

"Right or left fork?" asked Jack.

"He kept to right, which you can easily see is the main road," replied the other; and even Budge was able to make this out by the lights of the lamps.

"How far ahead do you expect they are from us?" the fat boy asked.

"Well," replied Alec, slowly, "that would have to be a rough guess, and I can only figure it out from little things that it would be hard for me to explain. But all the same I'd be willing to say that the big car didn't pass over this spot much more than two hours back."

"Bully!" exclaimed Freckles, "because that would mean they'd have to pull up and get supper somewhere, which would give us a chance to ketch up. And as Judge Rollins hasn't any particular love for night riding, and is in no hurry that you know about, Alec, he's going to stop over again at some country tavern, like he did before. And there's where we'll find him after awhile."



"Then, if none of you have any objections, I'd like to ask you to hold up a few minutes for me," remarked Budge, blandly.

He had been looking for another tree that would sustain the weight of his motorcycle, the same as that of Alec held up, and while speaking seemed to be rummaging among the various traps with which he had loaded himself down in the start.

"What for?" asked Jack.

"To tell you the honest truth, I forgot something when we were through eating," the fat boy went on to say, humbly enough.

"Good gracious! and do we have to go all the way back to where we had supper, just to pick up your head?" Freckles observed, as if in dire dismay.

"Oh! I guess it ain't quite so bad as that, Freckles," replied the other, sweetly, "In the hurry of getting off I neglected to provide against the sting of the night air, which all of you must admit is getting quite sharp. I meant to put on that new sweater of mine, and break it in for a starter. Oh! here it is, so you see I won't be a very great while; and the horses will wait without kicking up a row."

"But look at all the stuff he's gone and



hauled out, would you? It'll take him forever and a day getting it back again, I vow. And Alec, ain't that the neck of his old twanging banjo I see sticking out there? Ten to one he did fetch the agony maker along with him on this trip, after all my warning? Now, what d'ye think of that for stubbornness? Don't it beat everything you ever heard tell of?"

But Budge never said a word, only worked hard to get his head and arms into the sweater which he had brought into view.

He had just succeeded in doing this to his satisfaction, and was still squirming to make the snug-fitting woollen garment settle when he chanced to step into the glow of one of the lamps.

Immediately Freckles gave a forlorn little cry.

"Oh my stars!" he gasped, "would you see what a fierce looking thing he's put on him—got a band running sideways down from shoulder to waist, and I bet you it's red, white, and blue, like Old Glory itself! Think of our modest partner wearing a blazer strong enough to walk by itself! It hurts my eyes, and will make every horse we meet run away from sheer fright. Oh! Budge,



how could you? And, fellows, didn't he say he picked it out himself, too?"

"That's all right," remarked the unmoved Budge, "she feels snug and warm and all to the good, which, I take it, is the main thing in a sweater. And take it from me, Freckles, you'll be wishing you had one just as comfy before the night's much older. I'll be ready in a minute or so, Alec, just as soon as I get this bundle all done up again."

To tell the truth, Alec himself was of the opinion that Budge might find that same sweater of immense value before the night was over, for the air was getting colder with the passing of every minute. They could see their breath now, and the wind was rising so that it moaned with a threatening sound in the upper branches of the trees. As a pretty good woodsman Alec knew that this was a sign of storm; and he had not forgotten those clouds hovering low along the northwestern horizon, as if only waiting for the signal to rush forth and spit out their snowflakes, so as to start a blizzard raging.

After considerable fussing and complaints on the part of the impatient Freckles, who did not like to be kept waiting so long, for he was like an eager hound on the scent, Budge



managed to pack up his stuff again; after which he calmly announced himself prepared to proceed.

"And I want to tell you, fellows," he took occasion to remark, "that I'm feeling just a hundred per cent better than before. Why, I was beginning to shiver, you know. Ridin' a motor cycle ain't like pumping a wheel, where you get all heated up by your work; here you just sit in the saddle like a monkey on the pony's back in the circus, and whirl along at a two-forty clip."

"Everything ready?" asked Alec.

When each of the others had answered in the affirmative the pacemaker was off again; and without any hitch in the programme Freckles saw both Jack and Budge get away, after which he too made a start.

One thing Alec noticed, and this was the fact that they seemed to have struck a very lonely section of the country. Why, they had not seen so much as a house of any consequence since four o'clock in the afternoon; and yet they had covered quite a few miles during the interval.

A few times they had discovered a cabin alongside the road; and perhaps there may have been farmhouses back some distance,



but to tell the truth it looked as though land could not be very good for growing crops in this particular section, since more of it was not in use.

In case of an accident it would be a difficult matter to get assistance. Perhaps the next village or town might be many miles ahead; Alec did not exactly know, as his road map seemed to be faulty with regard to describing this part of the country; from which he could only judge that it was not a road along which tourists as a rule would be likely to pass.

For some little time the procession of motorcycles kept on without any hitch occurring to disturb the peace. Budge was trying to do his very best, though under a great strain all the while, and beginning to perspire under his heavy sweater, partly from nervousness.

Then once more the signal floated back to their ears, telling them that Alec had reason to order a halt.

Wonderingly the others slowed up as they approached the spot where the light of his lamp shone. Jack jumped down; then Budge came lumbering along, making rather a clumsy stop, as usual, and just saving himself from sprawling on the road by what



Freckles said was "the skin of his teeth;" and presently that elongated individual pulled up.

Thus they were all together again.

"What's the blooming row now, Alec?" demanded the last comer. "Struck yet another jump road leading off the main stem? Say, if it's any rougher than the one we're traveling on right now, I hope to goodness the car didn't turn off. I c'n hear poor old Budge grunting right along as he gets bounced and jolted to beat the band. Hello! what you got there, Alec? Looks like a hat!"

"It is a hat, and I have seen it before, on the head of Judge Rollins," was the reply the other made.

"Did it blow off; and if so, why shouldn't he stop the car, and come back for it?" demanded Freckles, while the others also crowded closer in order to see.

"From the marks on the road I think the car must have stopped here," Alec went on to say, deliberately. "The chauffeur was down to fix a tire, or something. Then the other car came whizzing along, the racer you know, with the man in it who told the hotel-keeper he was a very dear friend of Judge Rollins, and wanted to overtake him the worst kind,



on a matter of urgent business. Here's something else I picked up on the roadside, where it had been thrown away, I guess. Looks like a walking cane, don't it, and broken at that? Now bend down closer, and look inside this hat belonging to Judge Rollins. Do you see something there, a dark spot?"

As Alec spoke he rubbed a finger on the mark, and then held it up.

The three chums stared, and held their breath in awe, for they saw that Alec's fingertip was stained with a decidedly reddish hue.

"Why, I do believe it's blood, and that Judge Rollins must a-been hurt right bad when his car stopped short!" exclaimed Freckles, staring hard at Alec's finger.



## CHAPTER XI

## WHAT DID IT ALL MEAN?

"Say, it does kinder look that way!" remarked Budge, wonderingly.

"But Alec hasn't said there was any sign of an accident, has he?" Jack went on to observe, significantly.

"Well for a fact, now, we don't see any signs of a breakdown here," Freckles admitted, staring about him; "just looks like the old car had come to a stop in the road. But if Judge Rollins wasn't hurt, then how d'ye reckon he could get a crack on the head? Oh! glory to goodness, that broken cane! Somebody must a hit him!"

Budge gave a horrified gasp.

Jack turned his eyes quickly on Alec, as though trying to ascertain what that observant chum thought; for he felt that since the pacemaker was on the ground first, and had had more time to speculate, he might have figured things out much better than any of the rest.



"Who could it a-been?" Budge wanted to know.

"Mebbe his chauffeur turned out to be a bad egg, and thought he saw a chance to rob Judge Rollins in this lonely place?" suggested Freckles.

"You forget that the man in the racing car came along while the other machine was stalled here?" remarked Alec, with such a meaning back of his words that even the usually slow Budge caught his suggestion immediately.

"Then he wasn't such an awful dear friend of Judge Rollins' after all; is that what you're giving us, Alec?" he demanded.

"I want to look around some more here, and try to figure it all out before we go on," the leader went on to say, "we don't want to make a mistake if we can help it; and from the signs I reckon there's been some queer goings-on right here. And, boys, please don't tread around any more than you can help, because it would be apt to wipe out the tracks, you see, before I got their meaning down pat."

"That's right," admitted Freckles, "and if you want any help, 'just sing out, Alec.'"

The others had the fullest confidence in



the ability of their chosen leader to bring about results in this line. Alec had been placed in a position to acquire considerable knowledge of the art of tracking, when spending a time in the West. And his chums had watched him doing certain work along that line when they were down in the mountainous country of North Carolina; on the plains of New Mexico; up in the Adirondacks; and while making a tour of the great National Yellowstone Park. Consequently they awaited the result with confidence.

Alec was seen to move here and there, bending low in order to examine certain marks he had discovered on the dusty road. These might be all Greek to Budge; and even Jack and Freckles would possibly have had hard work making any sense out of them; but to one who had had experience they could be read with a fair degree of accuracy.

In order to render his task the easier Alec had taken his lamp off the motorcycle, and used it to illumine the ground. Such was its power that he could see almost as well as in the brightest sunshine.

When six or eight minutes later he looked up, and nodded his head, the eager Freckles was the first to speak, with a question that



had been trembling on his lips for some time.

"Did that man do it, Alec; and what was the chauffeur at, all the while?"

"There are no marks of a struggle," replied the other, slowly, "and from that I seem to get the idea that the chauffeur was friendly to the man in the racing car. Perhaps they were even confederates, and this has been part of a scheme laid out to get possession of Judge Rollins."

"Wow! you give us all a cold chill, Alec, when you say that," declared Freckles. "I knew they did that sort of thing over in Turkey, Spain, Italy and such countries, but never here in free America. You mean holdin' a chap up for ransom, don't you?"

"Well, perhaps it doesn't just mean that," replied the other. "I'm trying to remember something my guardian happened to say about Judge Rollins, when he was telling me what a big man he was down in Wall Street, New York, and how he often held up the markets in securities. He mentioned that there was a syndicate that was after Judge Rollins the worst kind, to get him to come in and join them; and that it was partly to avoid them he came away up here."

"Glory be!" ejaculated Freckles, whose



eyes were distended until they threatened to actually pop out of his head. "Then perhaps this man in the torpedo-shaped racing car was sent out by this same old syndicate to get hold of Judge Rollins, and make him come in whether he wanted to or not. I've heard my dad say that these big operators down in Wall Street never stood back on doing all sorts of bold things, when then had just oodles and oodles of money at stake. Say, don't it just make your blood tingle at the bare thought of another fine adventure coming our way? And ain't we the luckiest fellers you ever heard of, always running into something exciting?"

"Huh!" grunted Budge, just as if to remark that nobody had ever heard him longing for excitement, if only he could keep on the level road, and avoid meeting up with accidents.

"But Alec," put in Jack, "what do you suppose has become of them all? Both cars left this place long ago. Do you reckon now that the stranger in the second auto, after crippling Judge Rollins, has made the chauffeur start off ahead of him, or else change seats, so as to have charge of the touring Alco?"



"I couldn't say about that," replied the other, "because there's been a heap of tramping around here, and the marks are some confusing. But we do know that the chances are, Judge Rollins was attacked and injured. His thick felt hat saved him more than a little from that savage blow."

Budge involuntarily reached up his hand, and took off his own hat to examine it, just for all the world as if he anticipated the coming of a time when he too might be glad that he wore such a thick head covering. Jack smiled at the act; but then Budge was always doing queer things, and they were used to seeing them.

"Well, what's doing?" demanded Freckles, belligerently. "I reckon now this ain't going to scare us off the scent, is it, boys? We've been through a few troubles of our own in the past, and oughtn't to shy at such a little upset. We go straight on, don't we, Alec, and try to see what first-aid-to-the-injured we c'n give?"

That was just like Freckles, who was a generous fellow, even though at times inclined to be eccentric, and often playing practical jokes. Let any one get into a mess, and Freckles would go far out of his way to



assist. Why, once he had been known to jump into a hole in the ice, where a boy who had often bullied him was struggling feebly, having struck his head when he broke in; but Freckles had held him afloat until help came, and then utterly refused to believe that he had done anything heroic.

"It seems to me," said Alec, seriously, "that if something like this has happened to Judge Rollins, he needs our help more than ever. We expected only to restore this valuable paper to him; but now it begins to look like we might have the fun of helping him outwit some mighty clever enemies, who have gone to work to try and force him to do something he must have refused before. Oh! yes, more than ever will we go right along now, believe me."

"Hear! hear!" said Freckles, pretending to clap his hands together, as if applauding this resolute declaration on the part of their acknowledged leader.

Even Budge mumbled his approval of the plan of campaign. He was not a great hand for excitement, but he never liked to be left out of the count whenever there was anything going on. And by slow degrees Budge would grasp the full force of the present



situation. When he did, and realized that Judge Rollins must have been made the victim to a plot on the part of those unscrupulous syndicate financiers who were bent on obtaining something of great value he possessed, then Budge was apt to grow enthusiastic himself; but it generally took a considerable time for such things to get a firm lodgement in his brain.

Jack, of course, was perfectly willing to do anything that Alec recommended. As a rule they thought pretty much along the same lines, and each depended more or less on the opinion of the other.

Apparently the leader seemed in no great hurry to proceed after this; but once more started to look around, as though in hopes of picking up a few useful discoveries that would serve as clues.

"Ain't you afraid they'll be getting too big a lead on us, Alec?" Freckles asked, finally, growing impatient.

"Oh! I don't know," replied the other, "fact is, I seem to have a hunch that this unknown man won't want to go on a great ways farther. You see, he wouldn't want to be seen in the company of Judge Rollins if they came to a hotel. It might get him



into trouble. What if he had hurt the gentleman more'n he meant to, this would be a bad job for him?"

"Then what d'ye think he'll do?" demanded Freckles, determined to learn what was passing in the other's mind.

"Well, I wouldn't be at all surprised to find that he'd turned aside at the very first chance he got, leaving the main road for some small side one, and either stopped with a farmer he knew, or else camped under the trees. That all depends on what they mean to do with Judge Rollins. If he is to be held a prisoner, then they've got things arranged to hide somewhere up in this lonely country. If they only wanted to get hold of him to take something away he was known to be carrying, why they'd change the plans, more or less."

"Oh!" exclaimed Jack, at hearing these words, "I guess you think that document Judge Rollins left on the floor of your guardian's library might play a figure in this game, eh, Alec?"

"Sure it might!" ejaculated Freckles, triumphantly, just as though the important discovery had been his.

"The thought came to me," Alec went on to say, soberly, "and for all we know it may



be the right idea. But just now we mustn't bother our heads about what this man in the torpedo-shaped car was after; we know that he was chasing Judge Rollins like Sam Hill, and that it looks as if the chauffeur was in the game, and had pretended to have tire trouble, just in this out-of-the-way spot, waiting for his accomplice to come along and do things. We reckon that Judge Rollins is a prisoner right now, and needs help the worst ever. And boys, let's be starting on."

"How about our searchlights, Alec; ain't they liable to give us away if so be the fellers is a-campin' in the brush alongside the road?" Freckles asked, solicitously.

"No danger as long as we are on the main road," replied the other, "but once we turn aside, and we'll have to douse the glim and leave it to the moon to give us what light we need. Come on, follow slowly after me, and keep close together, so we can help each other in a pinch."

Budge sighed as he prepared to follow in his turn. The prospect was not alluring in his eyes; for if he had trouble on the main road, and with those brilliant lamps to help him see the obstructions, what was he not bound to face under the new conditions?



## CHAPTER XII

## A LIGHT AHEAD

"Both cars started off from here, didn't they?" asked Jack.

"Yes, and the racing machine in front," replied Alec.

"Would you mind telling me how you know that, Alec?" asked Budge, "I know I'm a greenhorn about all such things; but then I like to know."

"Why, it's as easy as anything," replied the other, "if you look you'll see in lots of places where the tires of the racer have passed over those of the touring car. That proves how it came last."

"Well, how silly of me not to know," declared Budge, who was very frank to admit that he was an ignoramus, and especially when things had been made clear to him. "And so easy to make it out, too."

"That's what they said when Columbus stood the egg on end," chuckled Freckles.

Alec started off, and the others came trailing



along in the rear. He had cautioned Budge, usually careless about such things, to look after his muffler, so as to keep the exhaust from making any more noise than was absolutely necessary.

One thing Alec had noticed that pleased him in a measure, and this was the fact that the wind was now making more or less noise up among the leafless branches of the trees. If this continued, there was less danger of any sounds they made being heard by those they were following, in case they happened to be not far away.

The pace was slower than ever now, Alec was pretty certain that he had guessed what would turn out to be the truth; and he kept constantly on the lookout for signs of a road leaving the main stem, whether to the right or the left he neither knew nor cared a particle.

Sure enough, in less than five minutes he was discovered at a standstill by the next in line, and so once again the four boys drew together, each fellow quivering with expectation.

"Well, here's a little side road, all right," said Freckles.

"And if what Alec guessed turns out to be



true, then they've turned in here," Budge commented.

"How about it, Alec?" asked Jack.

"It's a go, for a fact, boys," replied the other, steadily.

"Then we just have to do it," groaned Budge, meaning to address only himself, though the others heard it too, and must have no doubt smiled at the fat boy's distress.

"They turned in here, and must have been looking for a road, because I haven't found where they've stopped, or anybody stepped out of either car," Alec continued, proving how speedily those clever eyes of his could search out things.

"A put-up scheme, all right, believe me," asserted Freckles, positively.

"Well, they may be, and again, perhaps they had planned to get away from the main road at the first chance, and so turned in here. Some wagon or car might come along, though we haven't met many, and upset all their calculations." Alec went on to remark, thoughtfully.

"I notice that you say 'we' and 'they,' Alec," Jack observed.

"That's because he still believes that tricky chauffeur is in the game along with



the man in the torpedo racer," declared Freckles, as quick as that.

"I can't think anything else," the other answered, "unless in some way the bold stranger has succeeded in bending the chauffeur to his will, perhaps by keeping him covered with a gun. And when there are two cars to be run, don't you see how impossible it would be for him to do that, boys?"

"Sure thing," Freckles acknowledged. "And I guess you hit the right nail on the head, Alec, when you say the two are cronies, as thick as molasses in winter. But you saw and talked with Judge Rollins' man when he stopped at your house; d'ye reckon he could be as tricky and as smooth as all that?"

"I've been trying to remember what I did think of Ragin," replied Alec, "and now that you speak I want to say that I didn't just like his eyes, they seemed shifty to me, just like the fellow couldn't look you straight in the face. Yes, I'm afraid he's a bad egg, this same Ragin."

"Has Judge Rollins had him long, do you happen to know?" asked Jack.

"I don't believe so," Alec replied, "because I heard him explaining something to the man



about the machine, which Ragain would surely have known if he'd been in the employ of the gentleman a month or so."

"That settles it, then," added Freckles, easily convinced, when he was already inclined that way.

They all had to take a look at the impression of the tires belonging to the two cars, as they made the sharp turn into the side road. Evidently this had been accomplished at a snail's pace, for there were no signs of skidding, or anything to indicate speed.

"And just like you said before, Alec, here's where the racer has crossed the track of the marked tire belonging to the big Alco," Budge surprised them all by remarking, suddenly.

"Well, listen to that, would you?" exclaimed Freckles. "Reckon I'll have to wake up, and take notice, if I don't want Budge to walk away from me. When he gets to reading signs, it's high time a feller called Freckles Codling made some noise. But what you say is all to the good, Budge. The racer was still behind when they did turn in here."

Budge could be seen making faces, just as though he might be summoning all his resolution to the fore. That was a way he had,



when there was a particularly unpleasant job in prospect he would arouse his courage by shaking his big head, and gritting his teeth in what he considered a savage way.

Alec turned to where his motorcycle stood, and the first thing he did was to cut off the supply of dripping water, so that the gas would cease to form from the carbide, and consequently the lamp would go out.

Each of the others hastened to follow his example, though it could be seen that Budge did so very reluctantly, as though he shuddered at the prospect of riding along that narrow and little used road, with only the deceptive rays of the almost full moon to guide him.

"Now, fall in behind me, and remember to keep as still as you can; no talking above a whisper, and no chaffing," came floating over Alec's shoulder.

"Oh! ain't we going to ride at all?" gasped Budge, hardly able to believe his eyes when he saw the other leading off on foot, trundling his machine alongside.

"Well, I should say not, over such a rickety road as this, and with only a peep of moonshine every little while, under the trees," commented Freckles.



"But they came along here, it seems?" urged Budge.

"What of that? Can't a car, on four wheels, go over rough ground that would make a motorcycle grunt, and turn turtle?" the tall boy went on to remark, sarcastically. "Mebbe you're just reckless enough to want to dash along here at fifty an hour, you're that bold and frisky, Budge, but some of the rest of us have got a little too much horse sense for that."

"Drop it, Freckles," said Jack, who was alongside the tall chum; and so Freckles had to take the balance out in sundry low chuckles, as he thought how he had given Budge something to wonder about.

Budge did not seem to care. He was so relieved to find that they did not have to ride where every chance was so much against them, that he could forgive his bantering comrade nearly anything just then.

Once they left the main road, and the woods seemed to shut them in. In places the moonlight was utterly unable to make much headway through the branches of the oaks overhead, still covered with their brown foliage.

As a consequence it was only with some



effort that they kept from getting off the road, and bringing up among the brushwood alongside. Indeed, had the guiding been left to Budge, for example, they would have been floundering pretty much half the time; but Alec had keen eyes, and moreover had picked up a whole lot of knowledge concerning things in times past, that came in handy just now.

Like a troupe of ghosts the four passed along.

Not a sound was heard from them now, save when possibly Budge sighed, or perhaps he incautiously struck his foot against the spokes of his rear wheel, as he bent over, the better to push the heavy motorcycle along.

Of course Alec was keeping a bright lookout ahead. He fully expected to discover sooner or later some sort of light that would indicate the presence of either a cabin or else a camp fire. For he felt positive the man who had driven the racing car after Judge Rollins, and violently attacked the Wall Street financier, did not intend going any great distance when he left the main road, and entered upon this branch.

What their next move would be, should such a discovery be made, Alec was not prepared to say; but that could all be left to the



future. He did not believe in crossing a stream until he came to it, or borrowing trouble; although for that matter the boy was a great hand to plan ahead.

And after all, it was Freckles who was the first to discover a light ahead.

"Alec, I see something!" he whispered.

At that the leader halted in his tracks.

"Yes, you're right, Freckles," he admitted, also lowering his voice to a whisper. "It flickers too, which means a fire in the open. They stopped, and went into camp. Perhaps Judge Rollins is hurt worse than we think, and the man is trying to do something to stop the bleeding."

"Wow! it'd sure give me a fine old headache to get a welt with that cane, and have it broke over me, too," said the tall boy, as he stood and with his comrades watched the dim light ahead rising and falling, just as the illumination made by a fire always will do.

"Do you think they'll be looking out for us, Alec?" asked Budge, uneasily; for at the time he was fumbling around one of his packs fastened to his wheel; and from which he presently drew out something that he hastened to secure about his person,—doubtless



that ammonia pistol, of which mention has been made before; and in which the fat boy seemed to place considerable confidence.

"Well, I don't see why they should," replied Alec, "since not a single one of the lot chances to know that we're around; even Judge Rollins couldn't dream that the boy he saw last in Staunton was chasing after him, backed up by his three motorcycle chums."

"Oh! I'm glad of that," breathed Budge, and then as though fearful that they might mistake his motives in saying it, he hastened to add, "that is to say, our chances of taking the enemy by surprise ought to be a whole lot better if they do happen to know about us, eh, Alec?"

"That's right, Budge," replied the other, kindly.

"Takes Budge to see through a grindstone when there's a hole in it," Freckles remarked, with a little sting in his speech.

But Budge was feeling in a humor to let all such things pass by unnoticed. He could stand nearly anything, he believed, if only they did not have to try riding along such a narrow and wretched road, with only the moon to guide them.

And so they once more went ahead.



## CHAPTER XIII

## CONVINCING BUDGE

"Hold up here!"

It was Alec who said this, turning his head so that his low tone could reach all three of his chums.

They had been pushing along for quite some little distance, and gradually getting nearer the spot where that fire was burning. And knowing the folly of trying to take the motorcycles any closer to the place, Alec now determined on effecting an arrangement whereby they would be freed from all responsibility in that line.

It entailed sacrifice on the part of one of their number; and knowing how stubborn Budge could show himself, once he took the notion, Alec felt that he must approach the subject with considerable caution and diplomacy.

"Listen, boys," he began, "you all know that we can't every one of us do just the thing we might like best, in a case of this kind."



"Yes, that's all right, Alec," remarked Freckles, possibly guessing what was in the wind, and wanting to drag Budge along into committing himself, so that he could not in decency back out.

"I'm willing to do just whatever you say, Alec," came from Jack.

Then they waited to hear from Budge. He seemed to know that he was going to be the goat; but then Budge was used to that sort of thing, and presently, when he really felt ashamed to keep them waiting any longer, he said feebly:

"Oh! I'll admit that it's got to be, Alec; what's the use having a captain if his word ain't law. But sometimes it comes hard."

"You never know how things are going to turn out, Budge," the other went on in what was intended to be a consoling manner. "Often the rear guard occupies the post of honor, and has to do all the fighting to save the supply trains. And when we put our precious machines in your charge, we place the utmost confidence in your well-known bulldog qualities; for we know that you'll defend them with your life, if it turns out to be necessary."

Budge was heard to heave a sigh. He



hated to be left there all alone in that desolate spot, while the others were all bunched together carrying out the rescue of Judge Rollins. But then, what was the use of trying to protest, when they were three to one; and after all, he could be spared from the firing line better than Freckles, or Alec, or Jack?"

"All right, Alec, call me the goat," he said, sadly.

At another time Alec might have tried to cheer him up, by explaining how such a position was deemed a post of honor. But just now it hardly seemed right and proper that precious minutes should be wasted in such a trivial manner. Budge must learn that when there was one who had been chosen to lead, his orders should be obeyed. Just as in that account of the charge of the Light Brigade at the battle of Balaclava, "theirs not to reason why; theirs but to do and die."

"All right then, we'll consider that settled, Budge," Alec whispered, "and thank you for being so reasonable about it. Now listen, while I tell you what I'd like you to do while we're gone."

Budge brightened up visibly at that; if he could only feel that he was of some use in



the matter, it would not be so bad, this staying behind, when his three comrades undertook the dangerous task of rescuing Judge Rollins.

"Tell me!" he said, simply.

"In the first place, as soon as we leave you, manage to get your machine turned around, so as to point the other way, understand?" the leader said impressively.

"Sure thing," responded the fat boy. "Next?"

"Then, one by one, turn all of the motorcycles until they are heading back the way we came. You understand, don't you, Budge, why that should be done? Perhaps we may have to make a quick get-away from here; and it'll take precious seconds if we had to turn the things then. A stitch in time saves nine, Budge, you know."

"Anything more?" asked the other.

"Well, yes," replied Alec, who knew the nature of the fat boy, and hence kept his voice pitched to an impressive tone, just as though the fate of nations depended upon the other carrying out his part of the game smoothly; "when you've got each machine leaning up against a tree, yours in the rear, stand by to strike up your lamp in a hurry the very second you hear me call out to you.



I'll say: 'Hit her up, Budge, old boy!' and with that it'll be your business to get your lamp going at a two-forty gait. Get that, Budge?"

"I certainly do, Alec, and I'm glad I can be so useful. Depend on me to the bitter end!"

But although Budge said this as brave as anything, he did have a chilly feeling when he saw his three chums making silently off, leaving him standing there alone on the deserted road and in charge of four motorcycles.

However, Budge liked to be busy, for it would take his thoughts off his desolate condition, more or less; so he began immediately to turn each wheel, taking great pains not to topple the heavy machines over, or in any other way create a row that might interfere with the plans of his companions, and bring reproof on his own head.

And doubtless, after he had accomplished this task, with more or less grunting and puffing, Budge would return once more to his own motorcycle, so as to get in readiness to strike a light, after he had allowed the water to drip gently into the prepared carbide, so as to form plenty of illuminating gas.



Meanwhile the other three advanced cautiously along the road. As they went they could see that the light gradually grew stronger. This proved that they were drawing closer to the spot where the camp fire had been started, for all of them felt positive now that no other light could give that flickering effect they noticed, certainly not the lamps of automobiles.

The circumstances attending this singular act of the man in the racing car were all so remarkable that Alec never once doubted but that he had struck pretty close to the truth when he made his guess; and that if the chauffeur and this other were in a plot to rob Judge Rollins of something, they had left the main road, so that by no possibility could any outcry be heard when the unfortunate gentleman came back to his senses again.

And instead of hunting up some isolated farmhouse to relate some story of an injured companion, they had chosen to camp right here in the open.

It struck Alec that neither of the men could know much about outdoor life; or they might have shown more hesitation about doing this, when so poorly prepared to battle



with a freezing storm, which he felt positive was even then brooding, and apt to descend upon them long before morning, hiding the road under many inches of snow, that would perhaps be whipped along before a piercing blizzard-like wind.

However, hours might pass before the storm broke; and then again it could come along at any time, according to the caprice of the weather clerk. Alec hoped it would hold off until he and his mates had accomplished their errand, and set Judge Rollins free, if it turned out that he was being held against his will.

Yes, that moan of the wind through the treetops sounded more significant than ever in the ears of the boy who had known what it was to spend a night in a snow forest, with a wild gale raging all around him, so that he had to hustle constantly in order to keep from being frozen to death.

When they came to a bend of the grassy road, still green in parts, for there had been little cold weather as yet to kill it off, upon looking carefully around before trusting themselves to pass on, they made a discovery.

And although it had really been already discounted in all their minds, still the sight of the two cars standing there in plain sight



gave the boys a queer thrill. It told them that they would speedily be enabled to set eyes on the strange man of the low-bodied racing car, whom the tavernkeeper had chosen to speak of after his own fashion as a "land pirate." Yes, and Alec found himself more than curious also, to see what the chauffeur, Ragin, might be doing about that time; since his actions were apt to decide whether he were indeed a partner in the evil game, or a victim of circumstances, and forced to do the will of the aggressive stranger, through threats of violence.

As the road was more or less exposed to the view of any person suspicious enough to glance that way occasionally, Alec decided to abandon it for the more secure shelter of the woods.

Accordingly he turned and whispered to his two chums.

"We must sneak up on them now, and try not to do a single thing that would attract their attention," he went on to say.

"Oh! I'm a good sneaker, all right," muttered Freckles, under his breath, "you just watch me do it."

And indeed, he did seem just built for the work, since Freckles could "fold up like a



hinge," as he himself described it, tucking his long figure away in a most astonishing way, and in this crouching manner creeping along like a shadow. After taking one look at how he did it, Alec had no further doubts concerning the other's ability to "outsneak" both himself and Jack.

They took advantage of various trees behind which they could crawl closer to the place where the fire burned. Before now they had sighted the flames, so that the very last doubt with regard to what caused the illumination was removed. It was a cheery blaze, too, especially since the air kept getting more and more nipping as time passed on, being already below the freezing point, and racing on fast to make a record drop.

Figures were to be seen moving about the fire, and Alec was straining his eyes to make these out. One he had certainly never seen before that he knew of, and on that account he felt positive this party must be the "pirate" of the torpedo-shaped racing car, the man who had told the innkeeper he was a warm friend of Judge Rollins; yet who had, as they judged, not hesitated to prove his affection for the financier by tapping him



over the head with a stout cane, and actually breaking the latter in the effort.

Yes, there was Ragin, the chauffeur. Alec recognized him from certain clothes he wore, as well as by his general manner. And so far as could be seen he stalked around the fire as though perfectly at liberty, and in nowise a prisoner of war, which went far to convince Alec right in the start that Ragin had been a part of the game, and while only a fair chauffeur, was no doubt a clever schemer.

“Well, that made two against whom they would find themselves pitted. Of course this was more serious than if they had had only the stranger to think of; but having put their hands to the plow, there must be no turning back now.



## CHAPTER XIV

## THE ONE WHO KNEW

Whether by accident or design the three motorcycle boys had approached the fire from windward. Perhaps Alec had learned that it is always safer to do this, if only for the reason that the vision may be clearer, and less danger of the watcher being half stifled by the pungent wood smoke, perhaps to the extent of sneezing aloud, and betraying his presence to the enemy.

They found more or less opportunities to crawl forward, yard by yard, until they were in a position to see everything.

After that there was more or less craning of necks, and scrutinizing of the region about the burning fire.

"I see him!" said Freckles in just the faintest kind of a whisper, though the rustle of the wind above made it impossible for any one to have heard a sound many times louder.

"Where?" asked Jack.

Of course there was no necessity to explain



who was meant by that word "him;" since Judge Rollins could be counted on as the only one missing of the three who had come in the cars.

"Raise your head a little; now look between that beech tree and the clump of bushes; see what looks like a log, don't you? Watch it, and you'll make out that it moves every once so often. That's Judge Rollins, all right," was what Freckles told them, in tones none the less positive because he had to keep his voice low.

"He's right, Jack," breathed Alec, quickly. "I saw him move right then, and it seemed to me as if he raised his head a little, to look around him."

"Then he ain't dead, which pleases me a heap," muttered Freckles, with a sigh of positive relief, as though he had been oppressed with doubts and fears along this line and was glad to have them lifted.

"But he must be a prisoner, Alec?" suggested Jack.

"Looks that way, for he doesn't seem to make any effort to get up, only watches the other two at the fire," came the reply.

"And what d'ye reckon they're doing?" muttered the leader.



"As near as I can make out, they seem to be trying to cook something after a way; and I guess neither of them chances to know much about camp life, either," was what Alec whispered back, evidently more than a little amused, because he himself had been "through the mill" so often that he knew all the little "wrinkles" connected with it.

He was trying to study the stranger, and discover if he could what sort of a man they had run up against. A good deal depended upon his character, and whether he would prove to be a fighter, or simply some unscrupulous fellow hired by the financial enemies of Judge Rollins to waylay the promoter, and accomplish some end they had in view.

"Huh! looks pretty tough!" Freckles muttered in his ear, showing that he too had been studying the man, and "sizing him up," as he called it.

"Something of a fighter, I think," Jack said in the other ear.

As both his comrades were of one mind, and his own opinion tallied exactly with that they had expressed, it might be set down as pretty positive then, that the stranger was a man not to be taken lightly. He would



not hesitate to treat them in the roughest possible way, once he learned how they had followed on his trail and that they knew of his cruel outrage upon Judge Rollins.

"We've got to handle that man without gloves," was what Alec told them both; and he meant every word of it too; he saw in the dark and strong face of the other the aggressive spirit that hesitates at almost nothing, when a desire has been once aroused; as witness the vehemence with which he had struck the gentleman in the touring car; not to mention his meteoric flight along the roads in that racer, in order to overtake the others at a point already agreed on between himself and the treacherous chauffeur.

Just then it seemed as though the two amateur cooks must have finished their operations at the fire. The stranger was heard using hard language as he examined the charred meat they had in a fryingpan, and sniffed disdainfully at the coffee that had been boiled until it was pure extract of the bean.

"Well, I guess it's better than nothing, Billie," he called out to the chauffeur. "So, s'pose you get the old man's hands free, and haul him out here to get his share, if so be he feels like eating, after that nasty clip



I gave him when I got the idea in my head that he was reaching for a gun."

Billie, which was Ragin's first name, as Alec chanced to know, thereupon vanished from view back of the bush, and presently came into sight again, helping Judge Rollins along, for the gentleman seemed to be weak from the shock he received when struck upon the head.

The stranger made a place for him near the fire, as though perhaps he felt the least bit sorry for what he had done.

"How you feeling, governor?" he asked, as Judge Rollins sank down with the air of a very weak man. "Kinder mean to hit you the way I did, but I honestly believed you was going to draw a gun on me. Here, have some of the meat, will you? 'Tain't just what you'd get at your favorite club down in York I reckon; but if so be you're as hungry as I feel, you won't kick at a little burnin'."

"No, I don't care for any; but if that's coffee you have, I would like a sup," the boys heard Judge Rollins say in a low tone.

But when the man turned his back for just half a dozen seconds to pour some of the suspicious looking liquid in a tin cup, Alec noticed that the wounded gentleman raised



his head quickly, and made a movement as though half tempted to try and run for it. This convinced the boy that possibly Rollins might be shamming to some extent, and that he was not injured quite so badly as he pretended, a fact that pleased Alec very much.

However, the gentleman must have realized that he had no possible chance to escape, with those two active fellows on guard; and hence he sank back again, once more looking abject and forlorn.

He took the tin cup in a shaking hand and swallowed the contents. The man stood there, looking at him in a meditative way, and frowning.

"Now, see here, Judge Rollins," he remarked, when the financier had finished drinking, "do you still try to tell me you don't know where that paper is?"

"Yes, I don't know any more than you do," replied Judge Rollins, shaking his head, while a look of bewilderment passed over his face.

"But you had it along with you when you started out on this wild goose hunt of yours to find Farrell; you own up to that, don't you?" demanded the man, sternly.

"I told you before I certainly had," re-



plied Judge Rollins, "but that it seems to have mysteriously disappeared, which fact I never dreamed of until you searched my pockets, then the interior of my car, my hand luggage, and everywhere such a thing might be found. I have no way to prove my word to you, and you will have to take it for what it is worth. Down in the Street it usually carries weight."

"Well," went on the other, angrily, "I never yet saw the Wall Street man I'd believe under oath, without asking your pardon, sir; and I still believe that you've got that precious document secreted somewhere about your person. I'm bound to have it, if I have to rip all your clothes to pieces, you understand that, Judge Rollins?"

"Yes, I believe you would do it, after the way you struck a defenseless man," the financier continued, boldly. "But I tell you in the beginning that you'll have your trouble for your pains, because the paper has very mysteriously disappeared," and with that he turned quickly toward the chauffeur who was seated at some little distance away, eating some of the wretched supper.

The man noticed the suggestive look, and



just as Judge Rollins doubtless wished, he instantly became suspicious.

"Billie, I don't suppose now, that you've seen anything of that paper I'm talking about?" he called out, sharply.

"Not a thing," replied the other, frowning.

"I didn't know but that you might have shown how light-fingered you were when a chance opened up," the other went on to say, with more or less sarcasm in his manner as well as in his voice. "Judge Rollins will be surprised when he learns that the Billie Ragin he engaged as his chauffeur is no other than Billie Jasper, one of the smartest rogues in all the East."

"Aw! what's the use of giving me away like that, Ten Eyck?" grumbled the other; and then shrugging his broad shoulders he went on to say, "but I reckon my usefulness is done with, as the trusted chauffeur of Judge Rollins, the Wall Street stock broker and railroad manipulator, and I might as well show up in my real colors. But I give you my word, Ten Eyck, I never so much as lifted a ten-cent piece since I hired out with this gent. And if the paper you're after is gone, then he's made way with it, that's all."



The man called Ten Eyck turned on Judge Rollins, and gave him a savage look.

"Well, just wait, and we'll see if there ain't some way to make even a Wall Street millionaire squeal," he growled. "That paper was worth a whole lot of money to me; and I went and gave my word that I'd crib it. 'Tain't often that I fall down when I set out to do a thing; and I ain't a-going to be blocked now, understand that?"

"Well," remarked Judge Rollins, "if you can find it, nothing would please me better, because then I'd still hope to get it away from you; and if it's lost nobody can ever profit from it. But when you speak of it being worth a sum of money to you, perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me who promised it to you, Ten Eyck?"

"I'm not telling my private affairs, yet awhile, and you'll have to take it out in guessing, sir," replied the other, rudely.

"Oh! well that shouldn't be a difficult task for me, because I happen to know that a certain clique of capitalists want possession of that document quite as much as I do, only for a different purpose. I expected to restore it to a certain party whom I have reason to believe is the real owner; while they mean



to use it for their own advantage. I'll not bother you asking that question again, because I already know the answer, just as well as though you had spoken it."

"Well, I'm meaning to give another look through your car, and under the seats. If that fails, then I'll make a search of your clothes, inside the linings, and everywhere a paper could be hidden. One thing's dead sure, somebody knows right now where that same valuable document lies, and that party will whisper the same in my ear, or I'll know the reason why."

He turned away, to start looking again through the big touring car; while the faithless chauffeur sat there munching at his burned meat, and occasionally turning his head as if curious to see how the hunt came on.

Although Ten Eyck did not know it just then, there was some one who could give a pretty good guess as to where the missing paper might be found. That was no other than Alec Travers, crouching there in the bushes, and listening to all this interesting talk; because he had an idea that it reposed in an inner pocket of his motor leather coat right then and there!



## CHAPTER XV

## UNDER THE BUSHY SCREEN

“Alec!”

Freckles gave his chum a little nudge with his elbow while thus uttering his name under his breath.

Those near the fire and the two cars were too busily engaged in what occupied their attention to think of looking around, and making discoveries. The man called Ten Eyck, who was evidently the brains of the scheme against the financier, still searched the pockets of the big touring Alco; and was grumbling angrily because the object of his solicitude continued to elude his most earnest efforts.

Billie, the faithless chauffeur, who, it seemed was something more in reality, and had only taken up this job as a means of enriching himself at the expense of his employer, still worked over the burned meat, being evidently hungry enough to stomach anything.

And Judge Rollins was apparently worry-



ing his head with the grave question as to how he was ever going to get free from the hands of these two mercenary rascals.

At least one might judge so, from the anxious expression on his face as he watched, first the man in the car, and then the fellow close by.

"What is it?" came back from Alec; and although the tone was so very low, still Freckles caught every word; for there was nothing the matter with his hearing if they did say that, owing to his impetuous ways, his judgment was sometimes at fault.

"Ain't we goin' to do somethin' pretty quick?"

That was Freckles all over; he did hate to wait longer than was absolutely necessary. Although he had the greatest faith in his companion, still, it seemed to him as though something ought to be doing.

Well, could you really blame the boy for wanting to make a move, when the night air was getting colder with every passing minute; and lying there motionless as they were compelled to do, their blood became chilled, so that all of them were actually trembling a little by now?

"Yes; keep still!" replied Alec.



That was the only way to hush Freckles up; there was no time for explanations, nor was the occasion suited to them. Alec was revolving several little plans in his mind, and he had not yet quite reached a decision as to which of them might prove the most suitable, and give the best promise of success.

Jack said nothing; for Jack was one of those fellows who can take a grip of their feelings and master them. He felt just as chilly as Freckles, and would possibly be about as pleased when the time came for them to show their hand; but all the same he was not making any fuss over the delay, and seemed contented to wait until the director was good and ready.

Besides, what was the use of making any fuss, when they could not do anything until some sort of a change took place in the camp? So long as those two brawny and desperate looking fellows were wide awake and on deck, it would be the height of folly for three half-grown boys, utterly unarmed as they were, to think of attacking them.

Of course, a chap with the sanguine temperament of Freckles, never counted the cost when urged to do things. He would have been quite willing to try and rush the camp, just



as though those two desperate rascals would run away at the first yelp, and leave Judge Rollins to their tender care.

Jack knew the chances were ten to one that the opposite was apt to prove true, and that after being roughly treated, perhaps knocked about as though they were so many bags of feathers, the whole three of them would be taken prisoners.

And if they once found themselves in that condition, little chance there would be for them to render first aid to Judge Rollins.

Oh! no, Jack knew that Alec was too smart a fellow to order an open attack, when the force opposed to them was so vastly superior. There must be some other method of equalizing things, even though they were compelled to wait until the two men had lain down, and gone to sleep; when one of their number might crawl into camp, just like an Apache Indian, to tell the truth, and liberate the wretched financier.

The idea pleased Jack more than a little; and if the others were agreeable he was quite willing to be the one delegated to do this creeping act. True enough, Freckles could excel him in flattening out, and getting over the ground as noiselessly as a snake; but



then Freckles was too apt to be hasty, and Alec would never consent that he should be given the job.

So Jack was planning all this in his mind as he lay there beside Alec. Perhaps he also moved a little restlessly, just as Freckles was doing on the other side of the chief figure; but at least Jack spoke no word to indicate that he was impatient.

What if the night did continue to get colder, they had their heavy leather jackets on, and through this barrier the chill could not penetrate very successfully. No matter, they must just stand it the best way possible, and wait for some sort of a change to take place.

Could Alec be hoping for some sort of break between the two rogues? That was a possibility, because already Ten Eyck was suspicious of his companion, and half believed Billie might have taken advantage of some opportunity to steal the valuable document before the trap was ready to be sprung.

Those clever words, uttered purposely no doubt by Judge Rollins, had opened this gap between the two partners in crime. Ten Eyck suspected Billie, and the chauffeur knew he was watching him in a meditative way. It made him uneasy, so that he too



occasionally cast surly glances toward the other, as though he resented being suspected of playing his crony double.

Jack could see how something might come of this, which would favor their cause. He remembered a very old saying to the effect that "when thieves fall out honest men get their dues;" and Jack secretly hoped such might prove to be the case in the present instance.

Doubtless when Ten Eyck had utterly exhausted the possibilities of the car, and was unable to discover any sign of the coveted paper anywhere about, he would try to make his threat good, and search the clothing of the banker, even examine the soles of his shoes, and in fact leave no stone unturned in the endeavor to bring about success.

Of course, like Freckles, Jack once or twice secretly bemoaned the fact that on this little excursion they had failed to bring their guns along. A brace of frowning weapons would be apt to put a different face on matters just then. But when starting out on the trip, who would have dreamed that they would find any need of the Marlins; and as a rule guns are a perfect nuisance to lug along when scouring the country astride motorcycles.



Well, it would not be long now before there was going to be some sort of change take place. Ten Eyck must be almost through with his search, and he had certainly scoured that big touring car from one end to the other, without meeting with any success.

Presently he would be striding angrily over to the fire, to demand that Judge Rollins start stripping off his clothes, no matter if the night air was nipping. It was the banker's fault that the paper was missing; whether he had hidden the same securely away, or really lost it; and he must not complain should they treat him severely in consequence.

They had been put to considerable trouble and expense in the matter, and there was a big stake dangling before the eyes of Ten Eyck, providing he could return to New York with the prize. No wonder, then, he was angry when faced with such a bitter disappointment.

Judge Rollins was evidently in for a very disagreeable experience, and one he would not be likely to forget for a long while.

If things came to the worst, and the gentleman's life seemed to be actually in danger, of course Alec would give the word that would plunge himself and his two chums into the



tempest. But unless the worst came to pass, Jack fancied they must continue to lie there, and wait for the two men to go to sleep.

Strange how his thoughts even strayed off to where Budge was keeping watch and ward over the four precious motorcycles; he wondered whether the fat chum still sat there, wide awake and, after his usual custom, imagining all sorts of strange things creeping around him; or if he had just snuggled down in the lee of a tree, and was fast asleep by now.

Yes, Jack even found himself hoping that if this latter happened to be the case, Budge would have the good sense to refrain from his customary snoring; because the wind was coming from that quarter, and might bring the sound with it, to awaken the curiosity of the two desperate men, and cause an investigation.

Talk about surprises, that would certainly give them one, should they discover Budge fast asleep there by the road, and guarding four motorcycles that gave positive evidence of having been ridden many dusty miles.

These little things would persist in forcing themselves upon the attention of Jack, causing him possibly to chuckle softly at times.

So more minutes passed by.



Ten Eyck was coming back now from the touring car. No need to ask whether he had met with any success, for his scowling face told plainly that nothing of the kind had been his portion.

Billie looked up expectantly, while Judge Rollins moved restlessly, as though more than half expecting rough treatment to follow.

And yet, although up to that moment none of those six personages in the little drama,—the three boys, Judge Rollins, and the two confederates,—suspected such a thing, there was hanging over the camp a shadow that was ready to drop at any moment.

Freckles was really the first to make the astonishing discovery, and perhaps it was only natural that he should be the one; because his eyes were roaming restlessly around, as though in search of something that could be utilized in case Alec gave the word to attack at any moment now; for he was hoping this was going to come.

He could hardly believe his eyes, and even rubbed them desperately before communicating his astonishing discovery to Alec.

But when he looked again there could be no mistaking the fact that something was moving through the undergrowth on one



side of them, and creeping toward the back of Billie.

"Alec! oh, Alec!" he whispered, and there was something so excited in his manner that the other just had to answer him.

"Hist! keep still, Freckles!"

"But looky, would you, at what's creepin' along over by that pig-nut tree; and by hokey! if there ain't another, two of 'em comin' yonder, back of Ten Eyck!"

And Alec felt a new kind of a shiver run through his frame as, looking in the direction specified in this whispered communication on the part of Freckles, he discovered three creeping figures of men advancing upon the the camp of the schemers!



## CHAPTER XVI

## A SUDDEN CHANGE OF CAPTORS

"Gee whiz!" gasped Freckles; and then he subsided into silence, taking it out for the time being in looking.

When Alec first saw the moving figures he was startled, because his impression was that several tigers must have escaped from a menagerie. Then it burst upon him that as on a previous occasion he was looking upon the striped suits of penitentiary birds, convicts who must have found a chance to burst their bonds, and were roaming the country up here, aiming to get over into Canada if possible.

Possibly the three men were furiously hungry, and the sight of Billie sitting there, to all appearances enjoying a hearty meal, filled them with not only envy but a desperate resolve to make a hasty descent upon the camp before all the food was devoured.

There was eagerness in the quick manner of their approach. They had evidently just



come upon the camp, and bent upon engaging with the two who seemed to be in control there, paid no attention to other matters. Hence they did not discover the three crouching boys under the screen of friendly bushes. And once the latter had seen the jail-birds they were very careful about making any movement calculated to attract attention.

Well, it looked very much as though there might be something doing very shortly around that region. No one heard Freckles begging Alec to make a move; the long-legged chum was giving all his attention to the actions of these three newcomers, and trying to figure out what they meant to do.

Of course they knew nothing about Judge Rollins, save that he seemed to be the prisoner of the other two men. They might search him in order to appropriate anything of value he chanced to possess, for up to now Ten Eyck had rather scorned to strip the banker of his watch and spare cash, though he seemed in a mood to carry things that far, after failing to find the paper he sought.

Billie still sat there, making out to munch away, though secretly he was listening intently to catch all that passed between the other two. Perhaps Billie had now become



possessed of a brand new idea; perhaps he believed that if he had the name he might as well have the game. Ten Eyck believed him guilty of stealing the document which Judge Rollins admitted having had recently in his possession, and the accusation may have opened up a profitable vista to the chauffeur; if only he could manage to get hold of the paper ahead of his confederate, he could make his own terms. \_

The blow fell with great suddenness, for apparently neither of the rogues so much as suspected that there was such a thing as danger hovering about their heads while so far away from any human habitation.

As though some sort of signal had been given, the whole three of the convicts hurled themselves bodily into the camp.

One attacked Billie, and struck him a wicked blow over the head that sent the chauffeur rolling over and over upon the ground. Horrified, the boys stared at the strange scene before them. They saw Billie scramble to his feet, and throw up his hands as if in surrender. Then, seeing his assailant jumping toward him again, with his cudgel upraised, and not daring to take the chances of another connection with that stout stick,



the wounded chauffeur made a quick bolt.

The last they saw of him he was making off at full speed, and in the direction of the motorcycles, though just then no one thought of that, there were so many stirring things happening in front.

Two of the convicts had leaped upon Ten Eyck. It looked very much as though they recognized in this individual the more important of the two, and hence worthy of double attention.

For a short space of time there was a mad scramble that carried the three struggling figures all around the cars that stood on the road near by. Ten Eyck seemed to have his pistol knocked from his hand, somehow, before he could make good use of it; but he had drawn what appeared to be a long-bladed hunting knife, with which he slashed viciously right and left.

The two agile convicts managed to evade his thrusts, but at the same time kept jumping around him in such a manner that Ten Eyck realized they did not intend to let him get away. It would be only a matter of a short time when, with the third fellow creeping up behind him, that cudgel would get in its ugly work.



Ten Eyck saw that to save himself from a knock-out blow that might even rob him of his life he must throw up the sponge. But tricky to the end he was determined that these fellows should not be enabled to run away with the two cars, and the way in which he started in to prevent this catastrophe from happening made Alec and his two chums stare and wonder.

Watching his chance as he jumped this way and that in avoiding the rushes of the two determined men in striped clothes, Ten Eyck suddenly slashed at the tire of the racing car, which burst with a loud report.

Quickly he found his chance to repeat this queer dodge, and the shock as one of the touring car's rear tires exploded, told that success had come to him there also.

After that Ten Eyck deliberately threw away his knife, and held up his hands in token of surrender, a smile of derision on his dark face.

Of course he was instantly clasped in the arms of one of the convicts. The other two stood close by, one of them with upraised club, as though half tempted to smash it down upon the unprotected head of the prisoner, only that the tallest of the bunch,



who seemed to be a leader, told him to hold his hand.

"What'd yuh do that for, partner?" demanded this man, standing in front of Ten Eyck, still in the coils of the second man's sinuous arms.

"To keep you from running away with the cars, don't you see?" answered the captured rogue, with considerable boldness, considering the nature of the men he was dealing with.

Alec thought such an answer most unwise, and that the tall convict would immediately order his companion to make use of his ugly codgel, but it seemed that Ten Eyck knew his men better than the boy did.

"Well," said the tall striped-suited figure, after a pause, during which he eyed the prisoner closely, "I like your brass, all right. So you thought yuh could keep us from using one of these here cars, did yuh? Take it from me, cully, that when we want tuh get away from here, and head north, in the mornin' that tire'll be mended, or a new one put on, 'less yuh want to cross the river mighty sudden-like. Hi there, Pete, skip around now and find somethin' to tie this critter up with. Where did his gun go to? Got



it, Pete; then pass it along to me, and I'll make sure thar's no one gets away from this camp tonight."

A plenty of rope was presently discovered in the racing car. Perhaps Ten Eyck himself thought he might have need of it to tie some one with, when he put it there, but the prospect of being himself the victim could never have entered into his head.

They forced him over to the big tree, and standing there Ten Eyck was made fast. Meanwhile the leader of the gang came back to face Judge Rollins, who had been a most interested spectator of all these remarkable proceedings.

The financier had of course made no attempt to escape while the row was in progress. No doubt he had seen what befell Billie, and having already received one hard blow upon his head, he did not yearn to have the disagreeable dose repeated.

But while his face expressed a fair show of interest as to what the outcome of the fight must be, there was little of hope reflected there. Judge Rollins realized that with him this change could only mean that he was jumping from the fryingpan into the fire. The faces of these three escaped jailbirds



gave no hope of such a thing as compassion or pity. They were the sodden countenances of old offenders, who all their lives had looked upon the world as hostile, and whose hands had always been raised against organized society.

They would rob him of everything he possessed; and indeed, he might consider himself lucky if they did not go even further, and do him bodily injury, because he failed to yield better plucking.

"Who are you, mister, and what yuh doing here with these fellers?" was the first question the tall convict fired at Judge Rollins.

"I was overtaken by this man while passing here in my car," replied the financier. "My chauffeur chanced to be a treacherous fellow, who sided with this thief. They wished to get possession of a paper that was of value to certain other business rivals of mine in the city, but which it chanced I had lost in some queer way. That's the situation in a nutshell, my friend. Of course you can treat me as you will; but I have been seriously wounded by one of these brutes, and am in no condition for running away, even if I knew where to run to. If



I have to lose my money, I would prefer that you should have it."

That was doubtless meant as a stroke of diplomacy but it did not deceive the tall escaped convict, who grinned horribly as he replied:

"Tanks, awfully, mister, but we'd a-sure got the same anyhow, as well as what the fightin' gent over yonder has in his jeans. Guess we'll have to tie yuh up to the same tree here, till we gets somethin' tuh eat, 'cause we're nigh starved tuh death. It won't hurt yuh any, an' we'll know where yuh air when we wants yuh."

And this was what they proceeded to do, although Judge Rollins kept on protesting that he could not possibly escape, since both cars were rendered useless for the time being, and he could not walk.

The man took occasion to run a hand into the banker's pockets while this was being done, and greedily transferred all the loose change he found there, as well as pocketbook, into his own trousers' pocket.

Then the three sat down to finish that meat and the coffee. Little it mattered to them, apparently, that the former was scorched, and the latter tasted like mud; it



was partaken of under the free heavens and, in comparison with prison fare must have tasted like a feast.

The three boys lay there, as time crept on, and watched, wondering what difference all this was going to make for them. Instead of two enemies they would now have three to contend with; and just as desperate scoundrels as Ten Eyck and his confederate could ever prove to be.

Really the situation did not seem to have cleared even a little bit; so Freckles surely thought, as he continued to watch the reclining jailbirds in their horribly suggestive garments, and figured on what an unequal match they would make for such desperate and sturdy rascals.

But Alec was seeing further than this. He believed that presently, when the new owners of the camp had dined and supped to the extent of the provisions provided by those they had dispossessed, the heat of the fire was apt to make them drowsy, so that they could not resist the temptation to sleep, leaving the disposition of all matters until morning. And it was while this condition rested upon the camp that Alec believed he could manage the escape of Judge Rollins.



## CHAPTER XVII

## ALEC'S CLEVER SCHEME

"Say, they're all asleep, Alec," whispered Freckles, after a while.

Of course the other had discovered this fact about as soon as Freckles; and he was of the opinion that if anything was going to be done, he ought to be about his business now.

Just as he had anticipated, the heat of the fire which the men kept roaring, together with the food they had devoured, caused their eyes to grow so heavy that one after the other they had dropped off. Perhaps it was not the intention of the tall man to leave the camp unguarded while that other fellow might still be in the vicinity; but sleep conquered him, even as it has many a better man in times past, and brought about more than a few historical catastrophes.

"I see they are, Freckles," Alec sent back, wishing to keep the restless chum quiet just a little longer.



"Ain't we going to do something right soon?" persisted the other.

"I've got a little scheme that might pan out, and perhaps it's time I tried it right now," Alec told them in a low tone.

"Ain't we in the game?" pleaded Freckles.

"Only one can go, and I've got it all laid out. You and Jack lie here, and keep your eyes on me. If you can find a couple of good clubs, all the better, though I keep hoping we won't need 'em. Now I'm off, boys!"

"Good luck, Alec!" whispered Jack.

"Same here!" echoed Freckles.

They twisted their necks to watch the daring companion, and to say that they were astonished to see him climbing a certain tree that grew close to the camp, would be putting it very mildly.

"Well, of all things!" muttered Freckles, "what in the wide world d'ye reckon he's agoin' to do up there?"

"Don't know; let's watch and find out," replied the cautious Jack, "but you c'n make sure Alec knows what he's doing. He said to keep an eye on him."

"Yep, and try and get hold of some sort of bully club, which my hand has just dropped



on this minute. If I ever have a chance to whack a feller over the head with this wagon-spoke, he's bound to see stars, believe me."

"Keep quiet, Freckles; get a grip on your tongue!" said Jack, who knew of old the weakness of the tall chum when it came to talking.

So they just lay there, and strained their eyes to see what strange trick their comrade had up his sleeve; for when it came to thinking up remarkable ways of accomplishing things Alec had no peer in their estimation.

He seemed to have no trouble about getting up among the branches, being an agile climber.

Then for a short time the two watchers lost sight of him, though they eagerly kept on the lookout. When he appeared again, it was in the most unexpected place.

"Gosh! Blessed if he ain't crossed over into that same tree where Judge Rollins and Ten Eyck are tied up against!" exclaimed Freckles.

"Not so loud, or you'll wake somebody up!" warned Jack; though to tell the truth he was almost as much astounded as the other at seeing what sort of daring scheme Alec had in hand.

It was all plain enough—the boy meant to



slip down the tree, and cut Judge Rollins loose. Just what would follow, then, of course must remain a mystery, but of course the fellow who could think up such a bright scheme as this was to be depended on to carry it out still further.

They could see him making his way, foot by foot, down the trunk of the tree now. Presently he would be at the last branch, when he must hang by his hands, and then drop lightly, a distance of perhaps a foot or so.

It was a splendid little trick, Jack thought, as he kept on watching; and he certainly did hope that none of the three sleeping convicts would arouse in time to interfere with the successful outcome.

Alec had met with more or less difficulties in crossing over from one tree to the other; but it seemed as though Nature had very conveniently allowed the limbs to interlock in such a manner that it was possible to swing out on one, and find lodgment on the other.

This he had done with a dexterity that only youth and suppleness could display; and all without making more than a rustling sound, which might have been caused by



the passing night wind. At any rate, there was no enemy awake at the time to notice it, and hence he had found himself finally safely lodged among the branches, and in a position to make the descent.

Once the watchers saw Alec come to a pause, and seem to hug the trunk of the tree as if in alarm.

Turning his head, Jack discovered that one of the men had sat up, and was digging his knuckles into his eyes. It was as though he may have had a dream that was far from pleasant, possibly concerning the coming of those men in blue uniforms who must be hunting high and low for the three escaped jailbirds.

He looked around him suspiciously, then lifted the coffeepot to see if he could drain a few more drops from it; yawned drowsily, dropped back again, and so far as could be seen, went fast asleep.

Alec did not move for some little time.

He dared not take chances, though his hands must have felt frightfully cold as he hung on up there.

"There, he's movin' again!" muttered Freckles, in a relieved tone, just as though he might have begun to fear that the com-



rade up in the tree had become so chilled that he could not continue his work.

It was true that Alec had thought sufficient time had elapsed to allow of the awakened sleeper to once more be far along the road to the land of dreams, for he was indeed again continuing to descend the trunk of the tree.

The lowest limb was just beneath his feet. Once he gained lodgment there and he would have to change his tactics, by making use of his arms, and then dropping. It was the most critical time for the success or failure of his object. If one of those wretches happened to arouse just at the wrong moment, of course everything was bound to be spoiled, for the intruder must be discovered, and a shout would bring the other two to their feet.

Freckles was gripping that club of his nervously, and trying to figure just how he might make the best use of the same in case necessity arose; for Freckles had always been known as something of a fighter, and among his boy friends in school was treated with respect on this account.

"Jack!" he once more whispered, in some excitement.

"Well, what ails you now, Freckles?"



demanded the other, more or less annoyed because it seemed so impossible to keep him still.

"It's snowing; I sure felt a flake on my face right then!"

"All right, let her snow!" said Jack, not bothering to figure what a little thing like this might mean in interfering with some of their plans.

Freckles evidently did not like the prospects of a wild motorcycle ride through a driving snowstorm, for he continued to mutter disconsolately to himself, even while watching the next move on the part of Alec.

After taking a good long look at the recumbent forms of the three striped jailbirds, and apparently acting under the belief that they were all sound asleep, the boy in the tree swung himself free.

His body hung down, with his hands clutching that lower limb, and his feet only a short distance from the ground.

Alec did not hesitate once he had gained this position. He had indeed gone too far now to retreat again; and the quickest way of reaching the ground was to let go above and drop.

But it was before he had reached this point



that Jack had seen him play what struck him as a very smart little trick.

Perhaps he was afraid lest Judge Rollins, dozing there, might be startled when he saw a figure come dropping down so unexpectedly beside him; and hence Alec set about letting the financier know of his presence in the tree.

His method of doing this was unique, although just about what might be expected of a wide-awake up-to-date boy, accustomed to doing his own thinking.

He took out a cord to which he had apparently attached some sort of small weight—it might be a lead sinker used in fishing, and such as a boy would carry in his pocket long after the season for such sport had passed.

This he carefully allowed to pass down until, by moving the same, he was able to gently tap Judge Rollins in the breast. Doubtless the dozing prisoner was considerably startled to feel that mysterious tapping at his front, and then to discover a moving cord that acted very much like the swaying pendulum of a clock.

He looked up though with an effort, on account of being so tightly secured with the binding ropes, and his amazement most have considerably increased when he saw some one,



surely a boy, making motions to him just above his head.

Perhaps the banker realized what was intended, and managed to nod his head in order to assure his unknown friend he would not shout out, or make any other noise calculated to betray his presence. At any rate Alec was seen to swing loose, hang his full length, and then let go above.

That settled the matter, since there could now be no retreating by the same route he had come.

Alec crouched there for a minute, to make certain that none of the sleepers had been aroused, and was raising a head bent on investigating.

Then he moved closer to where Judge Rollins was standing, meaning to make use of his pocket-knife blade, in order to cut the ropes.

Jack and Freckles were half erect at this critical moment, ready to burst upon the scene with the wildest shouts they could conjure up, in case Alec were discovered, in the hopes of frightening the escaped jail-birds and causing a hasty flight, under the impression that those they dreaded had found them out.

Freckles had even decided on just what he



would whoop, so as to further convey this impression, calling on the wardens to surround the camp and block every avenue of escape.

But it happened that Alec was fated not to have such an easy task of it after all. He had quite forgotten something, when thus starting out to cut Judge Rollin's bonds and set him free. There was another close by, who had been a decidedly interested spectator of all these little happenings.

That was Ten Eyck.

The clever schemer, it may be remembered was tied to the same tree as the financier; and he did not mean to see the other allowed to make his escape while a different fate was reserved for him. Consequently, Alec was suddenly thrilled to hear a low but determined voice saying almost in his ear:

"What's fair for the goose is fair for the gander; and if you don't cut me loose too, I'm going to spoil your little game by shouting out right now. Get that, boy?"



## CHAPTER XVIII

## HOW IT WAS DONE

Alec was quick to see that there was no help for it. Ten Eyck evidently meant all that he said when he threatened in this way. He saw a chance to get free from these uncomfortable bonds, and at the same time give the three convicts the slip.

If he allowed the boy to take Judge Rollins off, without cutting him free at the same time, he would consider himself a fool. It was either both prisoners, or none.

And so, to keep him quiet, Alec hastened to say:

"All right, Ten Eyck; I'll attend to you right away. I've got a lot of friends near by. They're covering the camp right now while I work."

He put it in this way because he thought it just as well to let the man believe that the other fellows were all heavily armed, and capable of doing terrible work if compelled to. Perhaps Ten Eyck would have been



amused had he but known how the most dreadful weapon the two concealed friends could muster just then was that cudgel Freckles handled; and which was hardly apt to cow three desperate escaped convicts.

And as soon as he had succeeded in freeing Judge Rollins, Alec did turn his attention to the other prisoner. He was really afraid lest Ten Eyck, in a fit of ill humor over the ill success of all his brilliant plans, might do something calculated to arouse the sleepers. Given a chance to think, he might even come to prefer to remain a prisoner, in the hopes that if he aided the three men to get away with one of the cars, they might still leave him the other, and the banker, whose marketable value they could not very well understand.

So Alec hastily severed the bonds that had been wrapped around Ten Eyck. In order to set the man free he had to do considerable sawing, for his knife did not have a very long blade, and the rope was pretty tough.

But it was accomplished at last.

"Good for you, boy!" muttered the man.

Alec did not wait to receive any thanks. Indeed, he expected nothing of the sort from such a tricky customer as Ten Eyck, and



only wanted to be as far away from him as possible.

So the boy laid his hand on the arm of the financier.

"Come this way, Judge Rollins," he whispered, drawing the other after him, and choosing a route away from the tree that would keep its trunk between himself and the fire as much as possible, thus making use of the shadows.

It was now snowing pretty hard, and doubtless the falling flakes would soon be the cause of the sleepers awakening. Little did Alec care, if only given three minutes in which to lead his charge out of the reach of the firelight.

He saw that Ten Eyck had started off in just the right direction, because it was exactly opposite the quarter where Jack and Freckles crouched in the bushes, and further away the four motorcycles awaited them, under the charge of Budge.

Step by step did Alec lead the other along, and Judge Rollins seemed perfectly willing to allow himself to be personally conducted. It may be he had already recognized Alec in this boy who had so miraculously come to his assistance when he was in such great need of help; and that fact must have further



pened, so long as they were not disturbed in their plans for escape.

For why should any of them sympathize with Ten Eyck for a minute? It had all been through his scheming that the tangle had come about. Only for his grand game entered into for the sake of personal gain, there would have been no trouble; and the motorcycle boys would have overtaken Judge Rollins in good time, restored to him his valuable paper, and then started back along the road on their return journey.

The last they heard from that quarter was the loud taunting shout of the man who was being hunted, which seemed to prove that thus far his enemies had not succeeded in overhauling, or winging him. And Alec thought that the chances were good for his ultimate escape, since the snow was coming down thicker than ever, now, and those desperate men would not want to wander very far away from the fire, and the two stalled cars.

Had Freckles been left to himself just then he might have still made a mess of it. He was so excited by all these happenings that he had lost all idea of direction; and upon hurrying off, would very likely have gone



in the wrong way, so that in the gathering storm he might have become lost in truth.

Fortunately, however, he did not have to depend upon his own efforts as a guide, because there was along an experienced woodsman. Alec had learned many things in connection with this outdoor life; and the first of all was never under any circumstances to start away wildly, or without first taking his bearings.

Of course it was easy enough in this case, because there was the half-hidden, little old road that, when followed for a certain distance, was bound to bring them on to faithful old Budge and his four charges.

Judge Rollins did not appear to be weak now, which fact proved that he must have been shamming to some extent when he acted as though he was. Perhaps he had hoped that if his captors believed him to be incapable of making any effort to escape they might grow careless, and give him the chance he craved. But the leader of the convicts had not fallen to the game, as his tying the financier to the tree proved.

Every foot they covered now took them further away from the scene of the tumult, and nearer a successful ending to their ad-



venturous trip. If only they could succeed in fastening Judge Rollins to the rear of one of the motorcycles, and manage in some fashion to reach a sheltering village before the snowstorm burst upon them in all its fury, they would have little cause for complaint.

But even though compelled to halt, and start a fire to keep from freezing, there must surely be some way of reaching a base of supplies, and keeping the wolf from the door.

It was therefore in rather a contented frame of mind that the three boys hurried down that faintly marked road. And the man who was in their charge was so overjoyed that he seemed to have been given a new lease of life, to judge from his sprightly steps while keeping his young rescuers company.

He must have heard one of the others call the leader by the name of Alec, which fact would justify his suspicions; and doubtless Judge Rollins was just bursting with curiosity to know how this ward of his friend, Mr. Worthington, whom he had last seen in far-away Staunton, chanced to be up in this country to the north, so many miles away from home, and wearing leather cap, coat and leggings that would indicate he must be on his motorcycle.



But however much he would have liked to ask questions, the gentleman was wise enough to realize that this was neither the time nor place for showing curiosity. All would be explained in good time. For the present he must simply feel that he had great cause for gratitude, and that he was under many obligations to these gallant boys.

The shouts had ceased back there now, which went to prove that in all probabilities the three convicts had given up the useless hunt after the fast running Ten Eyck, and made their way back in the direction of the fire, to figure out how it all happened, and where their other prisoner had vanished.

There was not one chance in ten that the boys would ever see them again, nor for that matter Ten Eyck either. They were just as well pleased, since they had no desire to add any of the parties in question to their list of calling acquaintances.

And now they must be drawing pretty close to where the four wheels had been left in charge of Budge. As they advanced it seemed to Alec that he caught an occasional rumbling sound from ahead; and the thought occurred to him that perhaps after all Budge had really gone sound asleep, and that this



was his contented snoring which was being wafted to their ears on the wind.

The snow had already caused the ground to appear more or less white, and as it came pelting on the still rising wind it stung whenever it struck them in the face.

This was a bad sign, Alec knew; it told of severe weather above, that could freeze the rain drops into hard little pellets like shot, and hurl them with such bitter violence on the blast.

They had now come to within about twenty feet of the tree where Alec believed his motorcycle had been left, when all of a sudden a voice struck their ears. It was surely the drawling tones of Budge; but whom could he be speaking to? And as they listened, while still advancing, they heard him plainly say:

“Now, I’ve been warning you right along to keep quiet there, and don’t move, even if your fingers are getting stiff with the cold. Be careful now, or off goes your head. Don’t you feel my pistol pressing against the base of your neck. Say, let me tell you, if you knew all that was loaded in this same pistol you’d just shiver worse than you’re doing now, all right. So take warning, mister, and don’t dare me too far!”



## CHAPTER XIX

## BUDGE MAKES GOOD

"Listen to Budge, would you?" cried Freckles, so astounded that he even forgot any need of caution while they were still so near the place where the camp fire burned, and the three convicts were doubtless gathering once more.

Perhaps Alec guessed something of the truth, for at the time he remembered that Billie, the chauffeur, had run off in this direction, when the attack was made on the camp beside the stalled cars.

They pushed forward.

"Don't worry, Budge, it's us!" exclaimed Jack, not wishing the guardian of the motorcycles to get rattled, and bombard them with his ammonia pistol; for that was really what he was holding against the neck of the alarmed chauffeur.

Whether Billie had come upon the scene by accident, and Budge had conceived the idea that he meant to run away with one of



the wheels, the other boys could only conjecture. Nor did it matter to any great extent. They were dealing with facts now, and the only one that concerned them was that Budge was holding up some person, and had possibly been doing so for an hour or more, constantly threatening to press the trigger of his "gun" if the other gave him half an excuse.

What Billie must have suffered during that time could only be imagined. For indeed, how was he to tell any difference between the cold pressure of a "squirt-gun," that scattered ammonia every time the trigger was pressed, and the genuine simon-pure article.

As he had no eyes in the back of his head, and could not have seen in that darkness anyway, Billie must have sat there all this time, shivering as though he would fall to pieces. It would be something for Budge to plume himself on later, when narrating how he had seized upon the unknown, and commanded him to sit down, on penalty of being blown to pieces; to follow suit himself, and keep his prisoner on the ragged edge of suspense all this time.

Of course they did not want Billie, had no



use for him anyway, and could not have carried him off, even though they desired to do so.

But he did not know that. When other voices chimed in with the one he had been hearing again and again telling him to sit tight unless he wanted to be treated to a fierce explosion, Billie of course believed that he was in a fair way to be arrested as conspirator with Ten Eyck. A long term in the stone jug loomed up before him, and made him desperate, so that he was willing to take chances.

And so, with a sudden leap, he was on his feet, and starting away. Budge was not caught napping, and discharged his ammonia gun straight at the head of the escaping prisoner.

As Billie chanced to be looking behind at the very second this was done, he received some of the spray in his face.

After all that was about the worst thing that Budge could have done, for the agonized yell which Billie let out must surely be heard by the three men at the fire; and there was always a chance that they would make a rush toward the spot to ascertain who had given tongue.



"We must get out of here in a big hurry!" said Alec, as the chauffeur went headlong into the bushes, whining and grunting as he ran, like a man who hardly knows where he is heading, and cares less.

At the same time he realized that it was going to be no laughing matter, getting started on their motorcycles, and with an extra one to look after.

Each boy had his machine in hand, and was ready to start. Alec turned to Judge Rollins, remarking quickly, as became the necessity of the occasion:

"Do you think you could sit behind me, sir, and manage to hold on by putting your arms around me?"

Already had the lamps been started, so that there was no lack of illumination. And to the great joy of the one who had asked the question the financier replied:

"I never rode a motorcycle, but a bicycle many a time, so I think I can do what you wish me to try. I'm willing to make the attempt at any rate."

"Start your horns, boys, and make all the row you can," remarked Alec, who fancied that he had heard the sound of coming footsteps.



The others caught on to his meaning. Of course, if a great racket were put up, it was likely to startle the three ex-convicts, who would imagine that there must be a regular crowd close by; and just then they could have no desire to make the acquaintance of strangers.

So Jack started off with a succession of blasts, Freckles chimed in, and quickly Budge and Alec did likewise. Not content with that, they let out a series of loud cheers and whoops, the like of which had never before been heard away from a college or high school football gridiron, or baseball diamond.

All the while Alec was getting himself fixed, for it is no easy thing to make a flying start with a passenger, especially when darkness surrounds the rider of the motorcycle, and snow is pelting down with a right good will.

"Ready, Judge Rollins?" he called out.

"Yes, let her go, my boy!" came the convincing answer.

Then Alec got away, and made as pretty a start as ever he had done in all his long experience with a flying motorcycle.

He knew that the others meant to follow



close after him, each one being careful not to run into the comrade just ahead.

It would be something to be remembered in future days, this wild dash along the wretched little grass-grown road, with the white snow already covering the ground, and making it doubly difficult to tell where road began and ended.

Perhaps the noise game had worked the way they had intended when it was started, and the three desperate characters whose coming they had feared may have been halted in their rush.

At any rate it was to be hoped that the last rider, Freckles, might have a fair chance to get off before they arrived on the spot.

It was after all a close shave.

Even as Freckles saw Budge starting, he also heard loud cries from a point close by, as though the men were running that way, bent on finding out what it all meant.

"Hold up, there!" a hoarse voice called.

Freckles knew that he stood a chance of being fired after if he refused to obey, but that did not stop him in the least. As he started off, he bent low in his saddle, being of the impression that this was the regular Western way when retreating under fire.



Well, there were several loud detonations, showing that the bewildered man who now carried Ten Eyck's gun was blazing away recklessly; but if he saw a target at all in the falling snow, it must have been only an obscure light proceeding from some swiftly moving machine which was itself in darkness.

There was no damage done, at least none that was known to Freckles, who bent all his energies toward keeping on the road, and not smashing into Budge, moving along in a stately manner just ahead.

There did not seem to be any pursuit. The men were so puzzled to know what all this meant that they just did not dare take further action, content to return to the stalled cars, which later on in the morning they might try to mend, should wind and weather permit.

Of course this riding along the little "tote" road could not have been carried on successfully for any great length of time. Indeed, though the distance to the main road was only half a mile or so, several times one of the boys came within an ace of taking a wild plunge into the scrub, when some obstruction was met that could not be seen on account of the deceptive whiteness following the fall of snow.



Each one slowed down, and came to a stop when the pike was gained, for it would have been an utter impossibility to have turned the same from the one they had been threading at night time, and in the storm.

Andy waited too, to make sure that all his company had made a successful get-away from the three convicts.

When Freckles came in as last man of the string, the leader expressed his satisfaction that they had done so well.

"We're making a record run of this, boys," he declared, as the last of the lot drew in without a single accident having happened.

There was Budge, panting a little it is true, for it had been awful work balancing, and keeping from plunging to the left or to the right; but fairly beaming with pride, as Alec saw when the fat boy chanced to come in front of his searchlight in changing his position.

"Are we off now for good?" demanded Freckles, wiping some of the snow from the glasses of his goggles, which he now adjusted, the same as he saw Alec had done; for they must at times have the storm in their faces, as the road wound around, first heading east, then northeast, and finally south.



"Yes, it's on the track now," replied the leader, decisively.

"Whew! but the snow's sure a-comin' down for keeps," remarked Budge, who had never as yet taken any sort of a ride in the snow, and was quivering with suspense concerning how he would come through it.

Alec kindly waited until every one else was ready, and equipped for the battle with the elements. He was determined in his own mind that he would not persist in the struggle beyond a certain point; and that flag must mark the real danger line for Budge, as the weakest link in the chain.

Far better that they stop off, go into the woods, and by the light of their several lanterns try and build some sort of shelter, before which they could start a blazing fire, than to keep on, and take desperate chances. What would it avail the rest if they managed to pull through, and poor Budge ran into a tree which he could not see in the blinding blizzard, to lie there with a broken collarbone, and perhaps freeze to death in the bargain.

But Alec would like very much to get back to a certain little village he remembered passing through a number of miles to the south, where no doubt they might be made



fairly comfortable at a tavern, and be able to send a message home.

"Ready?" he asked, when he saw that Jack too had fixed his goggles, and fastened his leather cap on, so that his ears would be protected from the stinging cold.

One after another they answered in the affirmative, and having thus made sure that at least the start was going to be unanimous, Alec hit up the pace.

Those motors were always kept in apple-pie condition, and being the best that money could buy, they could be depended on to do their full duty, no matter whether the weather were hot or cold; in rain or snow, it was the same.

And in regular order they made the start, so that presently four strange objects might have been seen moving along the whitened road about so far apart, each preceded by a dazzling shaft of white light that made the snow glisten like millions of diamonds, and disclosed the motorcycle that was next in line.

And it looked as though, barring any new accident, the adventurous journey in chase of Judge Rollins was now close to its termination, with "all's well" the victorious cry.



## CHAPTER XX

## MOTORCYCLES IN THE BLIZZARD

There was no chance to make anything like speed under those trying circumstances, Alec thought, as he led the retreat. All he wanted to do was to avoid having any accidents, and if such a thing were possible reach some village where they could find shelter from the storm.

Time enough to shape their future plans after this were an accomplished fact, and they had succeeded in finding temporary refuge.

Judge Rollins had apparently risen to the occasion manfully. Despite the wound he had received he was playing his part in a way that won the ardent admiration of the motorcycle boys.

Later on, when they learned that many years before the gentleman had been quite a well known athlete at Yale College, the secret of his grit was revealed. In this emergency the old spirit of "never say die" had been once more awakened, and he was able



to do things that few men of his age would have ventured to undertake.

He gripped his pilot around the waist, as he clung there back of Alec, trying not to interfere in the least with the other's manipulation of the motorcycle, and yet hold his place firmly.

If the one who guided the destinies of the machine were only able to keep it in the road, no trouble would come from the passenger who hung on behind.

But that was indeed the grave question which bothered Alec, as it did also the other boys, for with the driving snow interfering with their sight, even though the search-lights did their duty splendidly, it was a question at all times whether they could keep from leaving the road, and plunging into the undergrowth.

Everything was now dazzling white, so that it was difficult to tell where the edge of the thoroughfare left off, and the border of the woods begun. They were as a rule going with the storm, which helped some; but in another way it promised to add to their troubles, for the trunks of the trees were quickly plastered with the fine snow, and thus



rendered difficult to distinguish from the rest of the blur.

If wide-awake Alec found it very hard to keep going, what of the others? There was poor Budge, for example, never certain about keeping to the center of the road under the most favorable circumstances; it began to look as though they might be taking a terrible risk in allowing him to try and navigate under such difficult conditions.

In fact, hardly had he got fairly started, than Alec began to repent of having been willing to accept the chances of an accident. Budge had seemed so entirely confident of being able to keep up with the procession, that the leader had been tempted to make the start; but he was soon sorry.

What made it extremely hard was the fact that it was utterly out of the question to know how things were coming on behind him. He kept his ears strained to the utmost, but by now the whine of the storm had increased to what seemed to be almost a roar, as the wind tore through the trees, causing them to bend and creak before the long-delayed wintry blast.

As he turned some bend in the road it required pretty much all Alec could do to



prevent being blown over; and at such times his heart was in his throat for fear of clumsy Budge.

A dozen times he fancied he heard what sounded like a shout of alarm from somewhere in the rear; and on every occasion it gave him a nasty shock. He pictured poor Budge banging headlong into a tree that he did not see, and perhaps not being noticed by the others as they came along with their heads bowed to avoid the cutting blast of the driving storm.

The agony Alec suffered during that short time he would not soon forget; and it was rapidly becoming unsupportable.

Yet what could he do to bring about a change? Of course they might stop, and in the woods somewhere start a roaring fire that would take the chill out of their rapidly benumbing fingers. That would mean a halt all night there, exposed to the fury of what seemed to be a gathering blizzard.

Alec had to think quickly and decide on his course of action. Had it been only for himself that he had to consider, he would undoubtedly have kept on, and sooner or later reached some shelter, even though it were only a farmhouse rather than a village;



but when there was a lame member of the quartette to think about and worry over, he had to eliminate himself entirely, and look at things from the standpoint of Budge.

It was astonishing how rapidly the gale had sprung up, once it started. Why, it came crashing along through the woods with a shriek and a howl that must have struck terror to the heart of Budge, as he lumbered along on his motorcycle, which he long called "Old Hurricane."

The snow was no longer a wet one, but under the increasing cold seemed to become dry and powdery, as it always does in a blizzard. In this shape it was picked up by the wind, and filled the air more and more, so that as the minutes passed the difficulty of seeing was being increased ten-fold.

Alec realized that they would never be able to find harbor at this rate. Even now they were being made the playthings of the elements; and the chances of an accident hovered over their heads most threateningly.

What then was the use in taking such desperate chances? Alec was inclined to play the game cautiously, and especially when he had others to consider as well as himself.

And so he settled it in his mind that no



matter what difficulties they might face in making this camp in the open woods, while the snowstorm raged, it would be far better than to take chances pushing on in this manner, hardly knowing as to whether the comrades in the rear were coming along, or doubled up in a bad smash.

Having settled this in his mind, the next thing was to come to a halt, and getting out of the way, give the signal, so that the rest might heed in time.

Watching his opportunity when the coast seemed comparatively clear, and just before reaching a bend in the road that would have proven a particularly hard place to navigate, Alec shut off power, and applied his brake.

At the same time he called out, so that his passenger, clinging so desperately to his waist, might be warned in time:

“Going to stop here; hold yourself ready, sir!”

After all, it was not a difficult feat to do; and as the heavy machine brought up, their feet were immediately planted on the ground, slipping a little, but not enough to interfere with supporting the motorcycle.

Then Alec gave the blast upon his bugle



which was to be the signal for the halt. He could look around now, and see the glow of the next lantern through the pelting snow.

This turned out to be Jack, who hearing the loud blast of the horn, managed to pull up just short of the place where the leader stood on the side of the road.

"Is Budge coming along all right?" bawled Alec; for the storm was making such a wild racket by now that it was utterly impossible to converse in ordinary tones.

"Don't know!" came the reply; and looking as best he could through his goggles, partly covered with snow, Alec strove to catch sight of another glow along the lonely road.

At first he did not succeed, and his heart grew cold with apprehension lest he had waited too long before making up his mind to halt; and that disaster had overtaken the fat chum whom they all loved so well.

But then he reasoned that of course Budge, being always slower to move than any of his companions, would naturally fall more or less behind in this wild race; and as Freckles playing rear guard, must accommodate his pace to that of the other, the consequence was that both of them might be several minutes in coming along.



Still, Alec confessed to having a severe fright as he stood there, staring back along the course he had just covered, and hoping that all might turn out to be well with the other two boys.

"I see something coming!" called out Jack, presently.

"Yes, it looks like a light through the driving snow; but how queer it is. Now I can see the heart of it; but you'd think it a whirling wheel," remarked Alec in a loud voice.

He watched it bearing down upon them, ready to sound his horn at the right moment, so that the rider should not bring up too speedily, and fail to reach the spot where he and Jack and Judge Rollins stood.

Back of that strange light he could just faintly make out a blur that must be the motorcycle and its clinging rider, balancing to avoid being thrown as the tires slipped on the snow-cruled road.

Was it Budge, or Freckles?

This last possibility gave Alec another cause for shivering, nor was it the bitter cold that brought this about. But in another minute he would know the worst; for the on-coming rider was now at about the spot



where he must be warned that the halt had been called.

Hardly had this been done than Alec took immediate courage, for his quick eye had discovered infallible signs that told him the newcomer must be Budge. Freckles was too spry a fellow on his wheel to bring about so clumsy a stop; only Budge could be expected to negotiate such a thing.

Yes, and there down the road had appeared a fourth little glow that was rapidly expanding as the last machine came bowling merrily on; Freckles defying the storm, and bent only on keeping a respectable distance behind Budge's motorcycle.

Then all was well, and they had at least succeeded in making this first stage of the homeward journey, short though it had been, in safety.

Alec was no longer depressed in spirits. No matter what difficulties they might have to face from now on, so long as all of them were sound of limb he felt that they could do wonders. Why, it would be only a picnic, camping there, and forming some kind of a rude shelter as best the conditions allowed. Whoever before heard of a motorcycle run through a blizzard? It promised to be the



most novel experience of all that had been written down in the logbook which contained the record of the various runs they had made since the first machine was purchased by Alec.

"What's this mean, boys?" questioned Freckles, as he too was brought up with a round turn, and joined the group.

His teeth were chattering so that he could hardly form the words; but Freckles was nothing if not game, and so long as the rest kept on there would never have been heard a complaint from him.

"No use trying to keep this thing going," Alec called out; "there's too much chance of an accident about it, and I couldn't stand the responsibility any longer."

"Then what're we goin' to do about it?" chimed in Budge, panting, as usual, with the exertions he had been put to, in order to retain his seat, when his wheel manifested such a dogged determination to skid, and threaten disaster whenever he came to a bend in the road, however slight.

"Why, we'll have to break in here, somehow, and start a fire," replied the leader of the expedition.

"And that same fire can't get goin' any



too soon to please me, either," cried Freckles, who now found himself shaking as though he had the ague. "Wow! that wind just goes through even my leather coat, and seems to freeze my marrow. Alec, let's be gettin' busy right away."

Truth to tell, Alec was himself nothing loth. The very thought of a cheery blaze gave him solid satisfaction; and so he only too willingly led off.

Their object now was to run across some sort of a place where they might secure more or less shelter from the wind. This might be accomplished in one of several ways—a bunch of trees growing close together would do; or it might be a sudden rise of the ground, forming a little hill; and Alec also knew a trick that answered admirably under like conditions, provided they could run across a tree that at some time in the past had been uprooted by the storms that every few years swept across this section of country.

They had been stumbling along in this way for several minutes, and losing all idea of direction in the effort to push ahead, when Alec made up his mind there was really no need of keeping on.

The wind did not seem to come with such



violence just where they were at that particular moment; and perhaps they might go much further and fare worse. Besides, they were almost perishing from the cold, and he felt that Judge Rollins, being no longer vigorous, could not stand it much longer.

"Hold up here, boys!" he called out, "what's the use keeping on any further, when we can start our fire, and get warmed up?"

The others were just in the act of finding convenient trees against which to lean their motorcycles, when Freckles gave a loud yelp.

"Takes me to bring good luck!" he shouted in evident glee.

"What you got, Freckles?" demanded Budge, beginning to grow excited.

"Why, bless your innocent heart, Budge, see yonder what I've found—if that ain't some sort of a shack over there, you can take my head for a football!" was the exultant cry Freckles gave.



## CHAPTER XXI

## STORMBOUND

"Oh! tell me that again, Freckles," exclaimed Budge, "of all sweet words of tongue or pen, the sweetest are those that tell of home. A shack, did you say? Where is it? Show it to me, Freckles! My stars! but ain't it cold, though? And to think of you finding a real house, here in this wilderness. Oh! joy! Let's knock the people up, right away, and ask them to give us a corner by the fire! Hurry, Freckles. I only hope it don't fade away like they say things do out on the plains—when you think you see a bully old river that turns out to be only atmosphere."

Budge certainly did like to talk, once he became excited. The others, meanwhile, were acting, and for fear of being left behind, the fat boy suddenly shifted his energies from speech to deeds.

Trundling his motorcycle along he sought to overtake them. To his surprise they did



not seem to hesitate even a moment at the door of the cabin, but pushed right in, as though taking possession by right of first discovery.

"Why, I declare if it ain't empty!" was the exclamation Budge gave utterance to, as soon as he crossed the doorsill, machine in hand, to find that this three comrades were in possession.

"Huh! you c'n count yourself as nothing if you want to, Budge, but the rest of us think we stand for a whole lot," remarked Freckles, and as the roar of the wind and the rattle of branches did not sound near so loud once they had gained the interior of the lone deserted cabin in the snow forest, it was possible to talk without shouting at the top of their voices now.

"Let's get busy, fellows!" said Alec, as he placed his motorcycle in a corner. "Better put your wheels over here, where they'll be as far from the fire as we can get them. Then every one hunt wood. Given five minutes and I guess we ought to be seeing a fire on that hearth."

Even Judge Rollins started to carry out this idea, for he would not let them think



that he was unequal to the task of assisting in the gathering of fuel.

Out into the storm they went again, every one bent on dragging back any spare branches they could run across.

"Careful not to wander too far away," Alec had warned them all. "And if you do lose track of the cabin, stand still and shout. Somebody 'll answer, and give you your bearings."

And Judge Rollins must have considered that the boy who could think of a thing like this under such exciting conditions must have a pretty old head on young shoulders.

Alec did more.

In order that those who hunted for fuel outside should have more or less illumination while they worked, he placed one of the wheels in such a position that the light was thrown outside. Then he too started to assist in the work.

When five pair of willing hands are busy, it is wonderful what they can accomplish; and very soon there was quite an abundant supply of wood inside the sheltering walls of the old cabin.

Then Freckles, as the fire-builder, started operations, and quickly had a little blaze



going in the fireplace, which possibly had lain idle for many a year.

This being added to as it took hold, inside of another short space of time he had a roaring blaze, which caused Budge to draw near, and hold out his chubby hands now blue with cold, toward the generous heat.

"Say, ain't this the boss thing, though?" Budge started to say, as he tried to soak in all he could of the warmth, and beamed on his chums, meanwhile making room for them at the fire.

"Sure thing," declared Freckles.

Alec was trying to get the broken door of the cabin into standing up, so that a great deal of the cold might be kept out of the place. He knew that a long and far from pleasant night was before them, and meant to make things as comfortable as possible.

What awaited them on the morrow none could say; but boys live pretty much in the immediate present, and as a rule seldom worry about future possibilities.

"Ain't it a good thing we had our supper, though?" remarked Freckles.

"But that seems like a pretty long time ago," said Budge, thoughtfully.

"I hope you ain't gettin' hungry already,



Budge?" the tall boy observed, eyeing him chum rather wistfully, as though this might be put forth as a sort of feeler; because it may be remembered that Budge had been the wise fellow to carry certain supplies along; and perhaps Freckles was secretly hoping that still more of the same sort might be forthcoming.

"Perhaps Judge Rollins hasn't had a bite to eat since noon?" suggested Jack, "and if you happen to have something more in along with your stuff, Budge, I reckon you wouldn't mind getting it out. After that cold ride, I'd like a cup of hot coffee myself, first-rate."

"Count me in!" said Freckles boldly.

Budge did not say anything in reply, but cheerfully got to work with the various traps he had fastened to his wheel, that made it bulge "like a regular freighter," as Freckles often declared.

When he turned around a few minutes later he handed Alec another small package that was wrapped up in a newspaper, which, upon being opened, disclosed several more slices of delicious ham.

"And here's a whole loaf of bread to go with it," remarked the wonderful magician Budge, as he whipped the article in question



out from amidst a miscellaneous collection of things "too numerous to mention," Freckles declared.

"Bully boy, Budge!" shouted the tall boy. "That ought to give Judge Rollins a jolly little supper, and leave enough for our breakfast. No use talking, Budge, when it comes to laying in supplies, you go way up head in the class. You're fine as silk; and don't forget I'm your friend."

There was an abundance of coffee, though of course it would have to be taken clear, or "black," since they had no means of securing milk or sugar; but then no one objected to that.

And before a great while the coffeepot was sending out the most delicious odors those boys thought they had ever sniffed. The slice of ham was done to a turn in the frying pan; and when Judge Rollins sat there, breaking his fast, he looked as though he might be enjoying himself hugely.

All of them had their share of the coffee; and when the gentleman had finished his supper, Alec opened a little surprise for him.

While the fire crackled, and the old cabin felt pretty warm and comfortable, even if the fierce wind did find many a crack and



cranny through which it crept, Alec sat down beside the gentleman.

"I suppose you've been wondering whatever brought us along up here, Judge Rollins, when by rights we ought to be away down in Staunton?" he said, first of all.

"Well, yes, it certainly has struck me as a very singular thing, my boy," replied the financier; adding with a smile, "but one of the most fortunate for me that ever came about. And really, I never knew that motorcycles were apt to be in much use in winter time, around as cold a country as this."

"Wow! I guess they ain't, as a rule," said Freckles, who was an attentive listener; for he knew that Alec was about to tell the gentleman some pleasing news; and like most boys, Freckles liked to be on hand when there was anything of this kind being passed around.

"Well, it happens, Judge Rollins, that hiding there close to the camp of those men who were holding you a prisoner, we overheard a lot they said," Alec continued, approaching the subject by easy stages, as it were.

"Then you must know that fortune dealt them a pretty cruel blow," remarked the gentleman, "although at the same time I



received a part of the recoil of the gun, myself, if you will allow me to put it that way, boys."

"Meaning about the lost paper, sir," Alec went on to say.

Something about the way the boy said this caused Judge Rollins to give a sudden little start, and glance around curiously at Alec's face. What he saw there no doubt made his heart throb faster than its wont.

"Come, you don't mean to tell me that my lost paper could have had anything to do with this unusual run you motorcycle boys have made up into this wintry country?" he asked with a suspicious tremble in his voice.

For answer Alec thrust his hand inside his leather jacket, and produced some object which he hastily placed in the possession of the other.

"My guardian found that on the floor of the library long after you had left our house, Judge Rollins," he said, quickly; "and he seemed to know that it was of considerable importance to you. But you had not left him any clue as to where you would be, and he was bothered to know how he could communicate with you; when the idea came to



me that perhaps we might organize a little run during the Christmas holidays, since the weather was so remarkably fine, and perhaps overtake you."

The financier was very much pleased, and his eyes sparkled as he shook each of the three lads warmly by the hand.

"You have certainly done me one of the greatest of favors, boys," he declared; "and which I can never forget. To get this document in my hands again is a splendid thing, for it means a fortune to a poor old gentleman within fifty miles of here, whose family will be the happiest in the whole State after I've dropped in to see them. I just couldn't resist carrying him the good news myself, though I might have sent it by registered mail, and that is only a part of the debt I find myself owing you."

"Please don't mention it, sir," spoke up Jack, hastily.

"But I must, for it gives me a very unpleasant feeling every time I think of what that reckless adventurer, Ten Eyck, and his equally unprincipled confederate, Billie Ragin, as I knew him, would have done to me to make me confess where I had hidden this paper away. You see, they must have been



promised a very large reward by a certain combination of capitalists who could make good use of this document by destroying it, once they got it in their possession. Although you might not think so, it is worth fully one hundred thousand dollars to this old gentleman, and also to those New York financiers who are so unprincipled."

"Whee!" gasped Budge, staring hard at the innocent looking little paper which Judge Rollins was waving in front of him as he spoke.

"I was very foolish to take such chances," the gentleman continued, thoughtfully, "and your good guardian told me as much, Alec; I thought I might as well go on with it to the end. It came near being a serious business for me, I realize now; and that I am in a position to carry out my trust I owe in a great measure to the bravery of Alec Travers and his good chums.

The conversation was abruptly changed by Alec, who somehow could not bear to hear himself praised, though willing that his comrades should be at any time. Sitting there by that cheery fire, things seemed to take on quite a different aspect from what they had been a short time before. It is always that



way when danger has vanished, and the warmth of a fire dispels the gloom around one.

Freckles wondered what would become of the three escaped convicts, and whether they might finally make their escape across the lake into Canada. Jack was concerned more or less about the two stalled cars. Would Ten Eyck and Billie manage to come together again, and in some way get their hands on the racing car that had carried the former to the scene of the hold-up of Judge Rollins.

It was a question that no one could answer, just then at any rate; and possibly they would never know the final outcome of the matter.

"As to my touring car," remarked Judge Rollins, "I have some hopes of recovering possession of it again, after the worst of this storm has passed by. Perhaps, when we start out, we may strike a village or town where there is a garage, for such places are very common in these days of the auto. There I shall try to hire a responsible chauffeu for the rest of my stay up here. Money will accomplish heaps of things, you know, boys. And first of all, we will come back here in another car, if the snow does not drift too deeply, and haul my Alco back to town,



where it can be put in decent shape again."

All that looked simple enough, when seated there so comfortably by that cozy blaze in the old cabin that had so fortunately cropped up just when most needed.

Freckles ventured a guess as to what might be happening to Ten Eyck and Billie about that time.

"I don't want to act mean," he said, "but seems like they'd only get what they deserved if they had a finger or a toe frosted before they got together, and built a fire; for of all the bad eggs they sure take the cake. They make me think of some other hard cases we've run up against, fellers, while touring the country on our bully motorcycle. Now, while I'm saying all this, I reckon I'd be one of the first to get out there, and help a poor half frozen critter like Billie, if I should hear a cry for help come——"

Freckles came to a sudden stop in what he was saying, and sprang to his feet with a startled air, as a strange, weird sound began to fill the cabin, his whole manner indicating that he had an idea his generosity was about to be put to the test right then and there.



## CHAPTER XXII

## THE RESCUE PARTY

"Glory! if he didn't fetch that banjo, after all," roared Freckles, as he discovered Budge squatted on the hard dirt floor of cabin, picking at the strings of his favorite musical instrument, and apparently oblivious to all around him, for his eyes had a dreamy look.

Then, having found that the strings seemed to be all right, Budge began to play, and at the same time warble about the "Mocking-bird," an old but favorite song with the fat boy.

Freckles pretended to be filled with disgust, and made all manner of suggestive motions, even to thrusting his fingers in his ears; but in spite of it all Budge went right along until he had finished his ditty. Then he calmly turned upon his tormentor, and asked with a look of surprise on his round face:

"Were you saying anything, Freckles? I suppose you are a little surprised that I



etched her along; but then I know Alec and Jack don't mind me warbling a little once in a while by the fire, to pass the time away." Plunkety-plunk his hand went across the strings, and he prepared to start on "Coming Through the Rye," which was another of his favorites.

"It sounds all right!" announced Judge Rollins, who was feeling so good after this outcome of his troubles that he would have said as much should Budge express a desire to pound a tomtom after the manner of a wild Fiji Islander, or a Zulu medicine man.

"I think myself Budge deserves our thanks for wanting to entertain us," Alec went on to remark, significantly.

"And as majority rules with us, why, those who don't like music can find a good cool roost outdoors," was what Jack said; all of which made the fat boy grin happily; while Freckles sniffed disdainfully, humped his shoulders, and then, sitting there with his head between his knees, kept his fingers thrust in his ears.

"Oh! have it your own way, fellers," he remarked. "Guess I c'n stand it if the rest of you can; but it's cruelty to animals, that's what."



Of course this was pretty much assumed, for shortly afterwards it might have been noticed that Freckles no longer closed his ears, but was sitting there listening to Budge with just as much interest as any of them; and even joining in each chorus, as certain school songs came along.

It was indeed a singular thing to see those five before that fire, while over against the further log wall of the shack leaned four up-to-date motorcycles that hardly seemed in their element while a blizzard raged without.

But things had turned out so well, after all the lowering skies, that light hearts were the rule in that camp.

They sat up and talked and sang until quite late.

Judge Rollins learned more about the ways of boys that night than he had ever known before; and he seemed to have taken a most decided fancy for the three chums of Alec Travers, to judge from the manner in which he looked upon them from time to time, with a really affectionate smile.

It had been a wonderful experience for the childless financier, and might be the means of opening his heart from that time forth to doing more things for such lads in the great



city who were debarred by poverty from enjoying the advantages of education, or even proper outdoor amusements.

Every once in so often Alec would organize a raiding party, which he would lead outside to gather up more fuel, because he knew that during the many hours that must elapse before dawn they would have need of a considerable amount of wood.

On such occasions those who remained indoors would ask concerning the condition of the weather outside, with as much solicitude as might be shown by people who expected to go upon a picnic on the following day.

"Storm keeps up just as bad as ever," was the announcement Alec made, after he and Freckles had for the very last time ventured forth, and come back with a goodly supply of wood, "and chances are we'll stay stormbound here goodness only knows how long, unless——"

"Unless what, Alec?" asked Jack, as the other paused.

"Unless some one is willing to take chances with me in the morning, to find the road again, and heading south, come to a village where we



can get help, and rescue the balance of the crowd," Alec went on to say.

It might be noticed that he always counted himself in first whenever there was any difficult or dangerous work to be done. That was the generous nature of the boy, and which had made him the popular leader among his fellows that he was.

"I'm your mutton for that job!" immediately exclaimed Freckles, "because, you see, I've got such long legs no snowdrift can stall me. Promise me that, Alec, or I ain't going to get much sleep tonight, grievin' over it."

Which of course Alec hastened to do. The fact of the matter was that he was only too glad to have Freckles offer his services so willingly; because, if it had been left to him to choose, he would have picked the tall boy out the first thing.

It was getting late now, and all of them felt tired, so they determined to try and settle down and get what little comfort was possible beside that fire. Let the storm howl and blow all it wanted to, outdoors, they had little cause for complaint in there.

Perhaps the less said about that night the better. None of them got much sleep be-



cause they could not feel wholly comfortable at any time. While almost roasting in front, they would be shivering because some current of air crept through an open chink, and struck them squarely in the back. In fact, they had to turn around every little while to keep from being scorched on one side and frozen on the other.

But then no one made much complaint. Freckles grumbled a bit, but then they understood he was only following out his usual habit, and that if pinned down to a confession, he would willingly admit they had no reason to believe that their condition was so very bad.

All Freckles had to do was to hearken to that wild wind that tore around outdoors to realize that they had been highly favored in running across this friendly shelter in the nick of time.

But even a long night like this must have an end some time, and finally they saw that it was getting light outside.

"Everybody get up!" shouted Freckles, uncoiling his long form from the knot which he had been trying to consider a comfortable way of lying, just as though he might be a dog curling up.



The fire was replenished, and the last of the provisions that Budge had packed away in his hamper brought into play. At any rate, the smell of breakfast cooking put new life into everyone. They did not dare conjecture, however, where their next meal was going to come from; it was to be hoped that a rescue might be effected before they reached extremes.

And so the boys seemed just as merry over that ham and coffee and dry bread as though they did not know of a worry in the wide world. More than ever did Judge Rollins discover new causes to admire their cheery dispositions, when they could meet difficulties so gallantly, and conquer them too.

But those of our readers who have enjoyed reading previous volumes in this series are well aware that Alec and his three chums were never ready to cry quits; and that a situation calling for nerve and daring always aroused their best qualities.

Once the meal was disposed of, Alec consulted with the rest of his comrades, so that they might have a thorough understanding and no mistakes arise calculated to prove a serious hindrance to the success of his plans.



Then he and Freckles got themselves ready to start out.

Investigation early that morning had seemed to show that the blizzard rather gave promise of an early halt. Perhaps it might outlast the day, but Alec was of the opinion that it would wind up by another nightfall at the latest.

The high wind had drifted the dry snow, so that by avoiding the worst places it would be possible to make decent headway. And as the wind was still about in the northwest they would have it almost dead behind their backs when following the road, once they came across it.

Alec had taken his observations most carefully because he knew only too well that the most serious part of the whole undertaking would be while he and Freckles were trying to find the road. Once that was reached all they had to do was to make their way along it, and sooner or later they were bound to run into a small town he knew could not be more than a few miles away.

"Got plenty of matches along with you, of course?" questioned Jack, as the pair pulled the ears of their motoring caps well down, so as to screen their necks and then



buttoned their leather jackets closely about them.

"Yes, lots," replied Freckles, slapping his pocket suggestively, "nobody ketches this chicken floating around loose in the woods when there's such a freeze as this on the rampage, without a bully supply of the fire-sticks in his jeans. And Alec is on to that game too, I give you my word. Ready here, old top! Me to hold my own with you every time. Good-bye, boys, and you, too, Judge Rollins. Just keep comfy for a little bit, and we'll bring help."

So they were soon breasting the storm.

Freckles did not pretend to be anything like an expert woodsman, even if he was at home when it came to building fires, and such small things. Hence, he was only too willing to leave all such matters to the better judgment of his companion, who had had long experience.

Of course Alec had noticed the direction they had come when entering the woods on the preceding night, and it was well that he did so, since the snow had long since obliterated the last trace of the tracks of the motorcycles, and had he depended on anything



like this to guide him, he would have been groping in the dark in short order.

So he pushed steadily onward, alive to the situation, and taking frequent observations as to what lay around him.

Thus he remembered seeing three trees that grew together and made quite a queer formation; it had loomed up before the light of his lantern on the night just past and Alec had come near deciding to make the halt there; though on second thought he seemed to realize that the shelter would not be sufficient for five of them, and that they had better go further on.

Then he sighted a bent tree that looked like the hump of a camel; and shortly afterwards the tall stump of one that seemed as though it might have been splintered by lightning within the last year.

"It's all right, Freckles," he remarked, seeing his chum glancing at him with a question on his face, "I recognize that tree as one we passed last night. And unless I'm greatly mistaken, the road must be just over there, not more than fifty feet or so."

"Hurrah!" burst out the other, who had begun to secretly worry, when he realized what it would mean should they really lose



their bearings in the midst of that snow forest.

It turned out just as Alec predicted, for they ran upon the road in less than three minutes; though they had to look sharp even when they struck it, because under such a disguise as the heavy snow made, it was difficult to tell just where a road could lie.

Once they had their backs to the furious wind and pelting fine snow, the boys pushed on resolutely.

The cold was something fierce, just as Freckles remarked three separate times, and had they been facing the bitter wind instead of turning their backs on it, they could not have continued without starting a fire to warm themselves at, after half an hour's experience.

"Fine ending of a winter cruise over these Northern roads on motorcycles, ain't it now?" grunted the tall boy, as he bent half way down, and kept pace with his chum.

"It all comes in the game," was the cheery reply Alec made; for he seldom if ever had an excuse for grumbling; and this sort of thing always caused Freckles to feel ashamed of his failing; so that he did not say another word as they fought their way along, yard



after yard, with a dogged persistence that would not be denied.

And in the end they did come to the village, although it looked pretty desolate just then, in the grip of the first storm of the winter. The boys made their way to a tavern, where they thawed out beside a rousing fire. Alec soon made a bargain with a man who owned a livery stable near by; and half an hour later a big sleigh, loaded down with all manner of warm rugs and furs, started back over the course.

Here the sleigh and driver were left, while the two lads made their their way through the woods, to surprise their comrades with the good news.

Smoke was seen coming out of the rude chimney of the lone cabin when they drew near; and Freckles, suddenly bursting the door open, so that it fell in, shouted at the top of his voice, after his usual boisterous fashion:

“Tally-ho for Lockport! Everybody’s that is going get ready, and run your machines through to the road. This cabin’s ordered vacated right here and now. And them that don’t want to be left behind in the rush, get a move on, please!”



## CHAPTER XXIII

## HOMEWARD BOUND—CONCLUSION

It was no end of a job, as Freckles declared, getting the motorcycles through that snow-covered woods to the road, where they could be stacked on the sleigh, while the passengers held on the best way possible.

After more or less hard work, however, the job was accomplished, though Alec did have to go back and lend Budge a helping hand, for the fat boy was utterly exhausted, and had come to a complete standstill, while he breathed like a winded nag.

Then the journey was begun.

It was most assuredly like nothing the four boys had ever passed through before; and even Judge Rollins, with his long life to look back upon, could not remember having experienced the like. He declared again and again that he would never forget it, but must often in memory see that big sleigh with its strange load, creeping along through the driving snow, with the heads of every



passenger as well as that of the driver bent before the fierce blast.

In the end, however, they arrived at the village, and were soon inside the hospitable doors of the tavern, where the wheels were stacked in a corner, and the boys did ample justice to the midday meal, that piping hot was presently placed before them.

Judge Rollins had been making his plans, and after dinner he set about carrying them out. Calling in the assistance of the local police force, he engaged a car that was capable of standing up against even such a wild gale, and then boldly set out to recover his touring car. But it might have been noticed that, first of all, he left his valuables, and that document as well, in a sealed package that the landlord secretly placed in his safe; and also that Judge Rollins supplied himself with a revolver which he purchased at the local hardware store.

Meanwhile the boys had wired home, and assured the folks that they were all well. To Mr. Worthington Alec sent a longer message, telling him briefly a few of the things that had happened, and also that he had succeeded in placing the paper in the hands of the owner, Judge Rollins.



When they got back Alec would have quite a stirring account to tell his guardian, who always took the keenest interest in whatever the boy entered into, and would be only too well pleased to sit and listen by the hour, if it happened that way.

Of course, as a railroad ran through the village there was a roundabout way of getting back to Staunton. A train would be along about the middle of the afternoon, they were told, unless it chanced to be delayed by the snow, which they could take, storing their motorcycles in the baggage car, and after making only two changes, they would land in their own town.

"Well, here's where we've got to the last stage in our adventurous journey," remarked Freckles, after they had helped stow their motorcycles in the car, and then deposited themselves in another part of the train.

Alec laughed softly.

"I wouldn't be too sure about that, if I were you, Freckles," he observed, with a wink in the direction of Jack.

"And why not?" demanded the lanky chum, looking up quickly, as though he could scent new trouble in store.

"Well, all sorts of things might happen,



you know, especially when a train is running haphazard through a blinding blizzard," replied Alec.

"Great governor! you don't think there's any chance of our machines getting all smashed up, do you?" asked Budge, also taking the alarm.

"It might happen, you know, if the train ran off the track; but then there's one consolation we've got," Alec went on to remark, resignedly.

"Which is what?" demanded Freckles.

"None of us will be in a condition to make any complaint," drily answered Alec; at which Jack broke out into a laugh, just as though he thought it comical, while neither of the others found anything to be merry about in contemplating such an ending to a lively outing.

"Well, anyhow, I hope Judge Rollins gets his old car back, safe and sound?" remarked Jack, presently.

"Do you think he will?" asked Budge.

"Well, that depends a whole lot on who's who," replied Alec. "If those three men in zebra clothes are still hanging around that place, they may not know how to repair the breaks in the tires, and so they just can't



make any decent use of the cars, either of them. But if they pulled out, and either of the others come back, why, that's a different matter, because they know how to go about it."

"But they wouldn't dare touch the touring car, because that would only get them up against the tourists' association, that prosecutes auto thieves to the bitter end, regardless of any considerations."

"I wonder if they'll be gobbled up again?" ventured Freckles.

"Now, I suppose you mean the two men who were holding Judge Rollins a prisoner, and meant to rob him, given a little time. Well, they've succeeded in waking him up now, and I don't think he'll ever give such people half a chance again, do you? Both of those men are hard customers, and I miss my guess if they're ever taken again except through trickery. But we never expect to see them, or even hear of them again, so we can forget all about them now."

Freckles was not quite so sure.

"You know men like that, with all the world having its hand raised against them, are desperate customers to run in, and before they throw up their hands I warrant you



they'll make a heap of trouble for the wardens. They didn't know who we were, or where we came from; so even if they should get away they won't know who to look after in case they want to retaliate."

Budge said "amen" to that. True enough, he had seen nothing of the three convicts, but he had heard their fierce yelling, and that was quite enough for him. He did not want to make the acquaintance of such desperate fellows, for after all Budge was a lover of peace, and never allowed himself to be entangled in actual warfare, except as a last resort.

But these dismal hints concerning another string of happenings fell to the ground, harmless, for they arrived in Staunton that evening just at dark, with nothing serious the matter with any of them, or their wheels either, for that matter.

As they were not expected, there was no one to meet them, which suited all the boys save Freckles mighty well. That individual seemed to half expect to find all Staunton waiting there, with a brass band to play "Lo, the Conquering Heroes Come," and with red fire galore to paint the town a vivid hue.



The storm had not been so severe further south, and it was not a difficult task for the boys to ride home from the stations on their motorcycles, though they went very carefully, not wanting to meet with an accident on the home-stretch after passing through all those eventful scenes unharmed.

"Seems like we've been gone a whole month," remarked Freckles, as they stood at the railroad station, getting ready to make a start.

"A fact!" echoed Jack.

"So much has happened since we went out, that it's no wonder we've kind of lost track of time," added Alec.

"How long ago was it anyhow?" asked Budge, with an air of bewilderment that made the others roar.

"Just two days by actual measurement," replied Jack, "but if you made allowances for all the things we've been up against, I should think it was nearer two weeks. In all our traveling about the country I don't think we ever had so many exciting things come along in such rapid-fire order, do you, Alec?"

"Well," was the non-committal answer of the leader, as he prepared to start off on his machine, "it was a pretty warm propo-



sition, that's all I care to say, and just remember that we'll get together at my house in the morning, to spin the yarn for the benefit of my guardian. Three heads are better than one, and perhaps some of you can describe certain parts of the story better than I could. There's that affair of Budge making a prisoner of Billie the chauffeur; nobody can do that justice but him. And so it goes. You'll run around about nine, fellows, won't you?"

They said they'd be only too glad to do so; and with that they separated, each starting out to cautiously negotiate the slippery streets, which were in no suitable condition for motorcycle travel.

But they all succeeded in getting safely home, because Alec, a little worried, made it a point to call each one of his three chums up later on, after supper, and find out that this was so.

The boys were all on hand the next morning.

Alec had a little surprise for them in the shape of a night letter from Judge Rollins which he read to them. The gentleman must have felt that they would be somewhat curious to know whether he had recovered his Alco car again; and also if he had learned anything



new in connection with either of the three escaped convicts, or Ten Eyck and Billie.

“Found car—all fixed—go on in morning—hope to see you all before long when returning—racing car gone—no sign stripes or others—expect Ten Eyck came back—perhaps Billie too—will be on guard after this. Good luck to you all. Judge Rollins.”

Then Mr. Worthington came in, and the tongues began to rattle. There was little necessity for Alec to say much, when Freckles and Budge each wanted to keep on the floor, and spinning the yarn from beginning to end. Once in a while Alec called them up short, when the flattery began to get too thick for him to stand; but they stuck to their guns all the same, and put most of the honor for wonderful success of their adventure where honor was due.

And Mr. Worthington was a wise old gentleman who could read between the lines. Besides, he knew just what his ward was capable of doing once he set his mind on anything; so he just listened, and absorbed it all and was able to draw his own conclusions afterwards.

They put in the whole day talking it all over, for no end of things came up that cre-



ated mild argument, until they were threshed out and made plain.

Of course the motorcycles were taken care of, and oiled and wiped clean; so that the shining speed mounts might be found in A1 condition when next needed. They say the Arab is kinder to his horse than to his wife, and, however true that may be, the wise owner of a motorcycle always looks after his wheel when he has exposed it to slush and mud, because he risks his life every time he rides forth, and the better care the less chance of a mishap.

And sure enough, Judge Rollins did turn up within the week, to be warmly greeted by his old friend Mr. Worthington, who seemed to feel an even deeper interest than ever in the financier since the latter had become, as it were, an Honor member of the motorcycle club. Together they sat and talked of all that had happened, and Alec's guardian heard an entirely new account of the doings of the boys, that made him more pleased than ever.

Those boys could have had almost anything they wanted, the gentleman was so filled with benevolent intentions, but they steadfastly declined to accept of anything



more than the small expenses of their trip.

But there was some sort of a secret between the two elderly gentlemen; for when Judge Rollins finally went away he smiled at Mr. Worthington, and winked in a very knowing manner as though they had something all fixed up.

Perhaps some fine day Alec and his chums might find themselves face to face with a nice little surprise; and if that turns out to be the case let us hope that we will have the pleasure of relating the facts connected with it in another volume for the edification of the numerous boy readers who have thus far delighted to follow the adventurous fortunes of Alec, Jack, Freckles, and Budge.

The End.

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